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Long wait and other stories

Henry V. Larom
The University of Montana

THE LONG WAIT

and

OTHER STORIES

by

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This whole book is but a draught--nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash and Patience!

--Herman Melville

Moby Dick

INTRODUCTION

I

As I drove down University Avenue after a twenty-year absence, I thought that the campus looked much the same. There were some new buildings, but the oval drive was still surrounded by lawns and trees. Behind the homely little clock tower on Main Hall, Sentinel Mountain rose sheer and green, and along its slopes the saddle horses grazed, reminding me that I was West again.

The campus still had a magical effect on me, a feeling of quietude; it still seemed an island where people from all over the Northwest, youngsters only a generation or two removed from the pioneer life, could stop mining or ranching or dude-wrangling the tourists long enough to study and develop their own culture.

Partly because of my love for the West, partly because this was the only educational institution in which I had ever really been happy, I enjoyed for the first time something suspiciously resembling an "Old Grad" feeling. I had no particular right to it; I had studied here for only one year, yet somehow the democracy, the vitality, and the honest intellectual excitement of the place had left its mark on me. Now after twenty years in the East as a reluctant advertising executive and hack writer, I had returned to work for a master's degree, and to indulge in what meant most to me--

creative writing.

It was a curious feeling, this return at the age of forty-seven. It was rather as though my life were a long strip of film, and I, the editor, had suddenly cut out twenty reels of experience, rolled them carefully and put them away in my private laboratory. They were useful as material; they were full of meaningful happenings I wanted to write about, but they were no longer the main plot. They were a part of my life to which I would never return.

I found out, of course, that editing out my past did not make me twenty years younger. I had to learn to study again, to concentrate for long periods on books with high intellectual content, and until I became used to quizzes and examinations, there were some moments of quiet desperation. Also, ahead of me were stories to be written that must eventually become the equivalent of a thesis.

Now that they are finished, I find that if they are read in chronological order they present, by implication at least, a continuing narrative. The reader can observe in the first story, "Cliff Dweller," the writer of twenty years ago. In the second, "Incident at Rock Creek," he can see the obvious influence of my radio experience. The last three stories show my attempts to master the new forms and techniques, and to use my own emotional experiences instead of commercial formulas. Read as a group, they represent a

hack writer's attempt to return to sincerity.

II

In 1931, as I remember it, there were two distinctive qualities in the writing at the University, a powerful, sometimes harsh realism, and a strong feeling for regionalism, a desire to describe life as lived in the Northwest. Both were at their best in the regional magazine, The Frontier (later Frontier and Midland). Writers not only attempted to capture the experiences of the old timers and to get at the truth of the early pioneer days, they also described the contemporary West in fiction and poetry in a naturalism as pungent as sagebrush after a rain. My fellow students knew the Indians and the cowmen, the sagebrushers and the sheepherders, and they wrote with sharp penetration about the troubles of lambing time and the long weeks of drought on a homestead.

Their writing was clean and sharp; their themes were clear, and their very lack of tradition and sophistication gave them a vitality not often found in student writing. Also, like Vardis Fisher, then fighting for recognition of his naturalistic novels, they thought that someday they might have an audience, that there was even a chance of financial remuneration.

The techniques of the short story--as taught by my instructor in Creative Writing--were the two conventional

kinds, the plot story and the "slice of life." The plot was preferred, and required a suspense that would hold the interest of the reader until the last paragraph, but the slice of life, based on Ring Lardner or Hemingway, was used as a form of naturalism to show, by its very lack of suspense, aspects of Western life such as the bleak routine of the homesteader's life on the plains.

The preferred style of this particular professor was "realistic," terse, cut to the bone, and I remember being so enthusiastic about this lean formula that I carried it over into my senior thesis, making it for a time practically unreadable. It was effective in fiction, however, and made the students hunt for the hard-hitting verb, the economically descriptive adjective. It kept the style from becoming mushy or trite, and it made a story move ahead, forcing it to resolve itself.

I suppose it was an age of realistic writing everywhere. Although we read Criterion and Hound and Horn, our short stories were free from intellectualism. Owing to the depression, social themes were creeping in, but the thought that any story should be deliberately ambiguous, that it should be understood on a number of different levels, hardly entered our minds.

III

Now, once again in 1951 I was a member of a creative

writing class, and at the first meeting it so happened that the story under discussion, like the student work of 1931, was about ranch life. I thought the atmospheric detail good and the characterization interesting, but there were technical flaws in the plot development, and as they seemed quite obvious to me, I--all unaware--delivered an assured and extended critique. It was then that my twenty-year absence yawned like an abyss before me.

The instructor listened politely as though to a long and unnecessary phone call. Then, when I had finished, there was a pause, an emptiness, a long silence. At last the instructor returned to the title of the story, and starting from there he and the class dissected it to suit themselves, using strange terms like "symbolization" and "imagery," "focus," and "levels of meaning." As I struggled to understand this new vocabulary, I began to realize that the trouble with the story, according to the class, was that it had a plot; it had suspense, and was, in fact, what is popularly known as a "slick."

I learned at succeeding meetings that my short story course was directed almost exclusively at the "little" magazines such as Partisan Review, Kenyon Review, or periodicals of even more select circulation. I was told that the story's function was either as a substitute for the lyric poem or the familiar essay, and that plot, in the old sense of the

word, was dead. Instead, meanings were often deliberately ambiguous, suggestion took the place of incident, and the symbols, the extended metaphors, were often more important than the characters.

Some stories, like the nightmarish narratives of Kafka, require a professional critic's commentary even for the expert. Others depend on such erudite and scholastic allusions that a considerable pre-knowledge is necessary for understanding.

In order to grasp all this, I went back to the sources. I read short stories by Melville and Hawthorne, Henry James and James Joyce. I sampled a cross section of modern writing in The Partisan Reader, a collection from The Partisan Review;[1] I dipped into several modern anthologies. I listened to teachers and students until I thought that at last I understood something of what had happened during my twenty-year hiatus.

For one thing, during this time there have been a depression, a world war, a communist menace, a cold war and other developments that have given present-day students a feeling of insecurity. They are more sophisticated, in some ways more mature, but they are also more uncertain of them-

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[1]William Phillips and Philip Rahv, editors, The Partisan Reader (New York: The Dial Press, 1946).

selves than the students of twenty years ago. They feel that they are living in a chaos, that their lives are without plot or pattern, and that even while they are studying, the draft board awaits them, a shadowy, unpredictable, Kafka-like jury, ready at any moment to pass judgment.

Consequently, the pre-war realistic writing does not satisfy them, and they turn this way and that looking for meanings, trying to explain the things that disturb them. The ambiguous feeling which they have about living brings out writing inclined to ambiguity.

Because they feel this lack of pattern in their lives, and particularly in their future, student stories of today have little plot. In place of it they try to substitute a depth of penetration, and in that effort it becomes natural for them to turn to Henry James for a model. "James at his finest works on the principles of least action," says Clifton Fadiman in an introduction to a selection of James's short stories. "He may seem elaborate, but that is only because he has seen all that there is to express--and the all is multifarious, puzzling, 'thick,' to use his word."[2] James himself says there is an "odd law which somehow always makes the minimum of valid suggestion serve the man of imagination

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[2]Clifton Fadiman, editor, The Short Stories of Henry James (New York: Random House, 1945), p. xvii.

better than the maximum."[3] Or as Sean O'Faolain bluntly puts it, ". . . No artist nowadays will be objectively explicit in the manner of former artists. He is not interested in that sort of thing."[4]

Along with this tendency toward Jamesean analysis, has come the increased use of symbolism not only in the tradition of Hawthorne and Melville, but deriving also from the Freudian psychology. "Freud's influence on literature," says Lionel Trilling, ". . . is so pervasive that its extent is scarcely to be determined; in one form or another, frequently in perversions or absurd simplifications, it has been infused into our life and become a component of our culture of which it is now hard to be specifically aware."[5] Sometimes the "absurd simplifications" show up in our creative writing classes, and it is, it seems to me, as easy to fall into Freudian cliches as into any other kind. I have neither the space nor the knowledge to examine Freud's influence here. I simply point out its effect on the short story as I found it at this university. ". . . The whole notion of rich ambiguity in literature," says Trilling, "of the interplay

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[3] Loc. cit.

[4] Sean O'Faolain, The Short Story (New York: The Davin-Adair Co., 1951), p. 164.

[5] Lionel Trilling, "Freud and Literature," Criticism, The Foundations of Literary Judgement (Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, Gordon McKenzie, editors; New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1948), p. 174.

between the apparent meaning and the latent--not 'hidden'--meaning, has been reinforced by the Freudian concepts, perhaps even received its first impetus from them."[6]

A comment from a fellow student underlined for me another change in college writing. "Why!" he exclaimed incredulously, "You went to college before people read T. S. Eliot!" The influence of the literary critics is much stronger than it used to be, and is no doubt valuable and clarifying. But if the critics are taken too seriously, if their words become law to the writer, they can become dangerous. Stories that are too intellectual, based on strict literary theories, may lose freshness and understanding of life.

Perhaps the critics themselves are becoming aware of this. "In literature," say Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks in a note to teachers of English, "ideas leave their cloisters and descend into the dust and heat to prove their virtue anew."[7] It seems to me that Warren's own novels add weight to that statement.

One other change, caused in part by this intellectualism, is the decrease in the size of the short story writer's

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[6]Ibid., p. 179.

[7]Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Fiction (New York: F. S. Crofts and Company, 1944), p. 173.

audience. It has paralleled in a way Herman Melville's experience of a hundred years ago. He too, started with the more realistic type of writing in Typee and Omoo, and gradually developed his power with the use of symbols and allegory. But as he increased the symbolic content of his work, his popularity decreased until at last, by the time he had written The Confidence Man, his public had disappeared.

These present trends such as symbolism, intellectualism and depth psychology tend to make the writer's problem more complicated than ever before. But though the new techniques are full of pitfalls, they are becoming an integral part of modern writing, they can be useful, and I do not see how they can be ignored. Somehow, they must be added to the pre-war realism; the writer must learn to absorb them, to control and subjugate them without losing his own fresh, personal view of life. Three of the stories in this group show my first attempts to do this.

The first one, "Cliff Dweller," is here reprinted from the 1932 spring issue of The Frontier to show something of the student writing of the time. It is subjective, a story of mood, and projects back even further to around 1926 when I was an errand boy in New York City. I felt like a clerk that day in spring, and all my frustrated romanticism was blooming when I walked out on that dock. The story does not say so, but not long afterwards I rebelled, renounced the

New York of the twenties, and retreated to a dude wrangling job in Wyoming.

"Incident at Rock Creek" was started before I arrived at the University last autumn, and it shows, of course, the influence of radio writing. It is based on an anecdote told me by a pioneer woman in Wyoming, and concerns some youngsters who felt obligated one spring morning, to take part in the Sheepmen-Cattlemen's war. My problem is stated well by Sean O'Faolain: "Over and over again one has this experience," he says. "Somebody comes to you bubbling with 'a good story.'' At first one gets excited, and if the giver of gifts stopped there one might even still do something with the idea. But he goes on and on, developing, adding and completing, and the excitement evaporates slowly. What has happened is simply that he is not giving you an idea for a story at all. He has been giving you a finished thing, which, for months, he had been writing in speech. . . ."[8]

The woman who told me this anecdote was a dude rancher who had recounted it many times to her guests around the campfire. It was a completed yarn, rigid with her own sequence of ideas. However, I had long been intrigued with a certain type of cowboy--the happy, shiftless, western lily

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[8]O'Faolain, op. cit., p. 173.

of the field--and one morning while sitting at my typewriter these characters and the anecdote met--and "Incident at Rock Creek" was the result.

One of the hardest things for a hack writer to do is to stop hacking, to follow instead of a formula, the dictates of his own feelings. For instance, I once knew an exceedingly intelligent radio writer, who made a very good living from a crime program called "Big Town." Having learned to write and direct it with about one-third of his mind, he decided to use the other two-thirds on a sincere play, written to suit himself instead of a sponsor. He tried hard, he wrote and rewrote, but the final result was hack work still, and so it remained--just a bigger "Big Town."

To defeat such impulses as these, I wanted to get away from anything concerning the West, the subject of my juvenile novels. I wanted to tap my early life as the only son of a clergyman in the little Adirondack town of Saranac Lake. Because Saranac is a tubercular resort, because I had been ill there, and no doubt for many other reasons that I cannct analyze, I have never been able to use these early experiences of mine which should be my most valuable sources of material. At any rate, "Epiphany Sunday" is a first attempt to get away entirely from my usual techniques by using specific details and images from my father's church to evoke memories of childhood.

"The Long Wait" is a story I have had in mind for years, but which could not be written until I had perspective on it. I believe it shows something that happens to anyone who has spent a long period of illness in bed. The starved senses are suddenly flooded with sensations; the mere fact of existence becomes almost unbearably exciting, breaking up for a time at least the normal pattern of the patient's life. This new appreciation of day-to-day existence can become valuable and maturing for those of us who must live not only in our precarious civilization, but in a continual state of personal uncertainty.

To try and show how this experience adds to the growth and understanding of a patient, I have used a technique combining some use of symbol with incident, character, and suspense.

The field of advertising, as I have observed it, seems to attract two kinds of people. It is an excellent career for those who really enjoy selling, but because it deals in ideas it also attracts those who, in spite of high salaries, are never happy in it, and who spend their lives trying to reconcile themselves to maladjustment. "Turning Point" makes no attempt to satirize the flashy executive, the "huckster," the clever promoter. Instead, it examines this other kind of advertising man, and his attempt to justify his own life. To do this, I have tried to use some of the new techniques.

On one level, "Turning Point" shows an aging executive who has reached the top of his career. He is looking back, trying to convince himself that he is successful by seeing himself as a rags-to-riches, Horatio Alger hero.

On a psychological level, I try to suggest that his conservative Southern background has not fitted him to face reality. His romantic attitude is symbolized by the picture "Love's Dream." He enjoys Greenwich Village at first, but the shoddy actuality is too much for him. His sexual experience with the Communist girls, the "arty" stage his friend Hap is going through, the general deterioration of the life in his apartment, all push him toward a conventional way of life, and he takes the first chance offered to "make good."

Gradually he develops an inward frustration, a loneliness, and feeling of impotence and insecurity. To emphasize these I have used such symbols as the selfish, stupid wife, the loneliness of the people in the hotel across the street, and the girl who pulls the shade down at the mere sight of him.

On what might be called an over-all symbolic level, I have tried to show that the romantic ideal of the American business man is an anachronism. The symbol of the cleaning women is, of course, the stream of life, in contrast to the unrealistic "Madison Avenue attitude" of the huckster. I

have tried for a dash of irony at the beginning and the end by lumping Lincoln, Jackson, Edison and Horatio Alger together in a single sentence.

It may be objected that even the American business men have abandoned the Horatio Alger myth, yet actually Horatio was a sort of trigger to the story. A month or so before I wrote it, a well-known advertising man in the Middle West had his secretary write me a letter telling me about a boy's magazine which has since appeared on the newsstands. It is called Mark Trail and it is a first class slick-paper job. With this letter I received the "promotion" material that explains the magazine's function. "The American way of life can be dramatized in many ways," it says. "The countless American 'firsts' that are made possible by our economic system, production genius, and mass selling methods will be pointed up in articles and picture stories in such a way as to draw on the pride in being an American. Features with a youngster being taken through a steel plant, for example. . . will be one method. The personality stories of American business leaders with emphasis on the thrill of accomplishment and the Horatio Alger theme will be another."

The reader may be amused to compare "Turning Point" with the "Cliff Dweller" of 1931. "Turning Point" shows the influence of the modern teaching. It is more objective, more intellectual, more analytical, and tries to suggest

meanings that are not explicitly stated. Yet the stories have a similar theme. The youngster in "Cliff Dweller" standing on the dock, wishing he was headed out to sea, could be the advertising man of "Turning Point" twenty years later gazing across the street at the girl in the hotel window. However I may be fumbling with new techniques, I seem to be interested in the same problem, the everlasting human one of adjustment to life.

CLIFF DWELLER

Because it was Saturday, the office let him out before noon. They often gave him privileges like that, because he was a conscientious worker, a married man in his late thirties who had been with them six years.

It was spring, and he started to walk west in the pale sunshine. As he neared the river he could hear the sound of tug whistles, and once he paused to listen to the great rumble of an outward bound liner echoing through the street. Each vibration of the whistle touched something inside him and made it quiver in answer as though he were a sounding-board tuned for the purpose.

Into his mind flashed thoughts of different lands--disconnected pictures of travel advertisements, perhaps. A tall ship lined with little native boats full of brown bodies eager to dive for pennies; a hill town surrounded by olive trees; strange disconnected pillars against a red sky. He heard the rushing of water past a porthole, felt the throb of engines, and saw a gently waving skyline with a mere smudge of smoke across a sky-dome of polished steel. He heard soft, guttural language in the dark; palm leaves clicking together gently. It was spring, time to live again, to free himself, to be a man.

He strode out from the roaring mass of tall buildings

onto a dock. Barges full of crushed stone were tied to it but there were no sheds near at hand and the wharf, jutting into the sparkling river, afforded a fine view of the shipping in the bay. He walked to the end and seated himself on the stern of a barge.

The sun was hot. Behind him the towers glistened and bulged with the life of millions. In front of him, a slender schooner, a rare sight nowadays, was being towed up the river by a snub-nosed tug. The frail masts of the sailing-ship looked infinitely delicate against the smoky shore-line.

He expanded his chest in the sunlight. He was young yet. He must get out and be a man among men as he had been upstate--how many years ago--among his father's orchards. By God, it must be romantic working on this river! Even a tugboat captain lives outdoors and sweats. He wasn't so weak himself. All he needed was hardening.

Down the river came a freighter bound, he imagined, for North Africa, Genoa, Bayreut, and Constantinople. She was running at half-speed with a curl of water at her bow and a boil of foam under her stern. Low amidships, a cigarette funnel belched black smoke. The captain on the bridge would soon watch the city's great towers disappear behind Sandy Hook. His next sight of land would be Gibraltar against the low coast of Spain. That man was living! The seaman chipping paint and scouring decks--he would see all

these things and get drunk in a roaring, lusty way. . .

He heard a sound behind him. On a pile of lumber a few yards away sat a woman reading a magazine. She had dark hair piled low, a swarthy complexion, good features, and an exotic look. Her dangling gold earrings glittered in the breeze.

Taxi horns scratched the surface of sound; water lapped against the pilings. For a moment, the woman glanced at him. It would be nice to talk to her, to walk up and speak to her casually as though such meetings were common to his experience. She had dark eyes. She was Italian, probably, with a dissatisfied nature, longing, as he was, for life--deep vibrant life. Perhaps if she looked at him again . . . He felt good and squared his shoulders.

His reflections were interrupted by a loud hoot from a tug which was headed for the barge where he was sitting. It was a runty, stubby little fellow with a blunt nose well padded for bumping and pushing. It chugged and blew a bass whistle frequently to show that it was thoroughly masculine and much more important than it looked. As the Richard J. Sweetman drew nearer, he saw the captain, a man of about his own age, spinning the wheel through his fingers like a toy. An Irish lad, hard and chunky. He personified the stocky virtues of the tug itself. The man on the barge admired the captain, and felt a strange friendship for him. They were

of the same kind, kindred under the skin. When the tug drew alongside, he saw a great chest bared to the sun in the engine-room door. The engineer was giving the woman on the lumber pile the once-over. He evidently weighed in his mind certain possibilities. And she was looking at him--and, yes, she was smiling. The captain rang a bell; the engineer disappeared; a rope was tossed neatly over a piling. A deck hand leaped to the barge and made fast.

The man on the barge enjoyed all this. For a moment he felt a part of the free harbor life. The waves of a passing steamer rocked the barge gently making the towlines complain, as though they, too, desired to be cast free.

The crew were preparing to take his barge away. It wouldn't go far. But still, if the captain would let him go, it would be adventure. He looked a nice fellow, too. He called to him, "Say, Captain, where are you going to take me?" The engineer was standing in the doorway again, sweat glistening from muscular arms. The captain looked at the man on the barge a moment, an easy contemptuous look. "I'm not going to take <u>you</u> anywhere," he shouted. The man in the waist grinned. The words cut through the air and landed.

The man on the barge rose and looked at his pale, slender hands; he felt thin. He didn't belong here; he was a clerk in an office. The sun had gone under a cloud and the air was getting chilly. He passed the woman, who took

no notice of him. A breeze tinkled her earrings and brought him a faint smell of cheap perfume. She was looking at the engineer who, in preparation for his conquest, was wiping his hands on some oily waste. The clerk walked toward the windowed cliffs. A whistle blew somewhere. He had promised to take his wife to the movies; he must hurry home. He reached the street and was swallowed up by the Saturday crowd.

THE INCIDENT AT ROCK CREEK

(A story of the sheepmen-cattlemen's wars)

The trouble with Einar was that when you planted something in his mind it was like tamping dynamite with a bum fuse. You never could tell when it would go off.

Them days he'd just staked out a homestead on the Southfork and we didn't hardly know him, so Chuck and me was kind of surprised when he showed up one morning with an idea we was all washed up with weeks before.

"Boys!" he says, riding up to our shack on an old work horse. "Time has come. We got a war to fight."

"Light and set," Chuck says, tickled at company coming just when he thought he couldn't put off digging post holes.

"Sure, rest your bronc," I says, putting down the irrigating shovel gratefully.

"Nope, can't do that," Einar shook his head. "Sheep's crossed Rock Creek. It's war!"

"War?" Chuck squatted in the shade of the cabin and rolled him a smoke. "What's eating you, Einar?"

I see this is going to take some palaver, so I take off my irrigating boots. It was too nice a day to work anyways. "You going to start a massacre?" I asks.

Einar shook a finger at us and his blue eyes were

snapping. "It was your idea, remember?" he shouts. "Sheep's crossed Rock Creek and that's where we drawed the line."

I began to have a hazy idea of what he was het up about, but I didn't say anything.

"I don't savvy it, Einar," Chuck said, licking the cigarette paper. "We ain't drawed no lines."

"You drew line at Rock Creek. Ole Injun Joe Moccasin Foot crossed it!" Einar was heavy-set, pink cheeked, with blond curly hair, and I never seen him so on the prod. "You said you'd slit Joe Moccasin Foot's throat," he went on, bouncing heavily up and down on the workhorse's back. "You said you'd tie him to a tree and chap him to death with a dead sheep!"

Chuck stroked the droopy moustache he'd spent all winter growing. "I said that?" he asked, looking puzzled.

"You sure did! And Slim--" he pointed to me. "He threatened to stake Moccasin Foot out for bear bait."

"It don't seem possible Slim talked that-a-way." Chuck shook his head incredulous-like. "When was it we done all this?"

"Elkhorn Saloon. . . . and you know it. You was lit up like a church. But you remember."

Well, of course we remembered now all right. But you see that was the way Einar was. That had happened a whole month before, and we'd been on a bear hunt since. After we

was all through with something, here was Einar digging up the dead past. At least we hoped it was dead.

You see, Chuck and me had this little homestead we was trying to prove-up on the Southfork. Chuck was a reformed cowboy and didn't like to farm much, but between us we got a fence around the place, a kind of shack built to live in, a few cows, and during the winter we ran a trap line. Then along about last fall sometime this Einar come along, and in about three weeks he had his place looking so good he wouldn't have used our cabin for his outhouse. He was a real nester, a farmer.

Well, come spring and we get our trapping money, Chuck and me drove the wagon to town to buy supplies and sample some of the Elkhorn panther sweat, and just to be neighborly we take Einar along. We was just entering town when here comes a couple of riders loping up behind us, and we see it is Katie James and her Injun sheepherder, Joe Moccasin Foot. Katie James was a widow that run sheep up along the mountains. Right well-off, too, folks said. And when she pulled up alongside the wagon we could see that she was quite a handsome-looking filly. Her saddle was all duded up with Mexican silver conchos, and dogged if she wasn't riding astride in one of them split leather skirts all chopped up on the ends to make a fringe like what you find on a fancy lampshade.

"Hello, boys," she says, real cheery, looking at our beat-up old wagon. "How'd you winter?"

"Real good, mam," Slim says. "We et once a week whether we was hungry or not." He was just fooling, of course. There was plenty of game on the South Fork.

"Well, how'd you like a job?" she asked.

Me and Chuck winced at that word, naturally. But Chuck says, "What kind of a job?"

"Herding sheep," the widow says. "I could use another good herder."

Well, of course she seen her mistake right away. Chuck and me looked so insulted, she might as well of asked us to dig garbage pits. "Madam," Chuck says real formal-like. "Me and Slim here is cow men. We've rid for some of the finest spreads north of Cheyenne."

"You don't say!" The widow kind of laughs. Then she looks at Einar, who was sitting in the back of the wagon with his legs over the end where the tail gate was supposed to be only it broke off and we'd forgot to fix it. She seen his farmer overalls with suspenders on 'em, and knows he's no bronc fighter. "How about you?" she says, giving him what she figgers is a real provocative smile. "You're not afraid of sheep, are you?"

Ole Einar looks up at her, and his pink cheeks turn as red as a can of tomatoes. "No, mam," he mumbles.

"I'll bet you're not afraid of work," the widow says. And I see Chuck shudder again, automatic-like.

"No, mam," Einar says, real helpless.

"He's got a ranch, like us," Chuck says quickly. "A real smart outfit on the South Fork. He ain't no sheep-herder either, mam."

"That's right," Einar says, glad of some help. "I got homestead. On Rock Creek. I keep busy all day."

"That so?" The widow eyes him real speculative. "Rock Creek, eh? Well, always glad to meet my neighbors." Then she spins her little black mare around. "So long, boys," she says, and lopes off with old Moccasin Foot trailing her like a stove-up sheep dog.

Well, we didn't think nothing of all this until we'd set around the Elkhorn and talked to some of the boys for a while. It was then we hear about the sheepmen-cattlemen's war that was raging around in the Bighorn Basin. It looked like a man kind of had to keep his eye on his range. Well, we argued around for quite a spell, and we was a little noisy maybe, but Einar didn't say much. He just drank red-eye like it was spring water. Then after a while, darned if Injun Joe Moccasin Foot don't come in.

"There's one of them sheepeaters now, a Injun one," says Chuck. "A orey-eyed, blanket-tailed, moccasin-footed gut-eater," he adds elegantly. I never did find out why

Chuck hated Injuns so. But there's some as say he tried to run some cows off the reservation oncet and got caught."

"He better keep them sheep off the South Fork," I says. "Or I'll dry-gulch him and poison coyotes with his bones."

Now of course we said all this real loud so he could hear. "We'll protect Einar, too," Chuck goes on. "Good ole Einar. He lives furthest down the valley. We'll draw the line at Rock Creek and we'll keep this range free of . . ." I won't burden you with no more of Chuck's epithets. But meantime Einar just kept on drinking whiskey like it was sody pop.

Well, finally we got old Moccasin Foot in a corner, and while we make this promise to use him for bear bait if he moves any sheep over Rock Creek, Chuck sort of backs up our statements with an occasional shot at a lamp. He has got down to about the last two, when in walks Katie James with the Sheriff.

"That's my herder," she says pointing to Joe Moccasin Foot. "Those two broken down cow waddies are persecuting him, Sheriff. Do your duty."

Now note well, folks, that Einar still had made no contribution to this argument. He didn't even mention it next day after he'd come for us at the jail.

And now here <u>he</u> was looking for us to declare war!

Well, after Einar gets through repeating all the things he says we said, he draws a ol' pistol out of his pocket. "I'm ready," he yells. "Are you going to live up to the bargain?"

Chuck just watches him a moment, then he takes a deep draw on his butt and turns his head real slow towards me. "What do you think?" he asks. His eyes had no more expression in them than a gopher's.

"Well. . ." I looked up through the cottonwoods to the high rims. It sure was a beautiful day to waste irrigating. The ranges were covered with dusty green. Snow glaciers sparkled on the mountains. I see a couple of antelope high-tailing it over the sidehills, and it seems to me a much better morning for war than for fixing a headgate. "What about the widow?" I asks. "We don't want to tangle with no woman."

"She don't do no herding," Chuck says. "She's so rich she's got a full-time hand to wrangle the house cats."

"Well, then, we give Einar our word, I guess," I answered Chuck.

"You're right, Slim," he says slowly. "I guess we did."

"You going to help me?" Einar asks.

Chuck threw away the butt, sighed, and got to his feet. "Yep," he said. "War's declared. But we gotta do

this thing right."

"Whaddya mean?" Einar asks, suspiciously.

"We've got to attack in overwhelming force, don't we, Slim?" he asks.

"We sure do!" I says. "And we got to have the advantage of tactical surprise."

Some of this sailed over Einar's head, but he agreed anyway. "My dad was a cavalry trooper," Chuck goes on. "He said surprise and firepower wins wars. We got to have both."

"We got to have all them things to chap up Moccasin Foot?" Einar asks.

"How do you know it's just Moccasin Foot?" Chuck says. "They got other herders by now. Joe Basso and Mike McClurg both work for the widow."

This was a bit more than Einar had figured on. But Chuck was beginning one of his what you might call creative spells, and he is pretty hard to stop. He goes into the cabin and comes out with a old Civil War bugle his dad give him. He blew a couple of blats on her. "Invaluable," he says, "when we charge."

"Charge!" Einar looks plumb scared.

"Sure!" Chuck says, coming to attention. "And remember, Einar," he adds, real serious. "Some of us may never return." He points westward. "If by sunset, Einar, I am not with you any longer, but in the great beyond with my ances-

tors. . . . I want you to promise to blow taps over my grave."

"You fellers quit kiddin'," Einar said. "This here's serious. You oughta see what range looks like after them sheep work it over."

"You're right," Chuck says. "Einar, you're sound, very sound."

It's at about this point I see the neck of a bottle sticking out of Chuck's pocket, and I see we are going to oil ourselves up for battle. "Can I borrow your dad's sabre?" I asked.

"Sure," Chuck answered. "And I'll let Einar have the buffalo gun."

I think maybe I should explain that Chuck collected stuff like that--old swords and pistols, and this old smooth-bore gun he got on a bad gambling debt. Sometimes he loaded it up with salt and glass and stuff and fired it to scare the bears out of the root cellar we had never finished.

Well, by the time we got started down the road to Rock Creek, Chuck and I feel pretty happy about it all. We'd managed to avoid digging postholes and ditches, and at the same time we were doing a neighbor a favor.

You could see the prairie dogs and the picketpins duck out of sight as we rode along, and they was very wise to do so because of our armaments. Chuck had slung his bugle acrost

his chest. He carried a Colts .45, his rifle slung in a boot, and he had his rope down. Every so often he'd dab his loop over a sage-bush and drag it along a ways, saying that was what he was going to do to Moccasin Foot.

Me, I carried two pistols slung low on the hips, and then around my waist I had this sword. It clanked some, and kind of got in my way, but I thought if I could bear down on them sheep, waving a sabre, the moral effect might be real good.

In between us was Einar, and it was strange how he didn't have no enthusiasm over this charge. He didn't say a word, just rode along on this big old workhorse, looking like he should have wore a suit of armor. As a matter of fact, Chuck thought of that, but he couldn't figure any place to get one. Well, Einar had one pistol, and this big old gun that took two hands to hold if the old bait broke into a trot. I kind of wondered how Einar was going to figure in the charge, but I thought maybe the future was going to take care of itself.

Well, the nearer we got to Rock Creek, the more Einar began to worry, so Chuck passes him the bottle a couple of times. "Don't fret none," Chuck says. "Even if all three of 'em are there and the widow, too, they'll fall back before this charge."

"I'm glad we got an Injun fighter like you with us,

Chuck," I said, "or we wouldn't know what to do." The only fight Chuck had ever had with an Indian was concerning dice in a crap game.

A kind of troubled look crossed Einar's face. He was a great big feller, and the muscles rippled under his shirt like rattlesnakes under a blanket, but up to now he had never figured how serious war was. He was so tender-hearted he'd throw out feed to a pack rat. "Now, lookit!" he said. "I don't think it good idea to charge. I think we better talk first. Moccasin Foot really nice feller."

"Talk!" Chuck blew through his moustache. "Talk's no good to Moccasin Foot. We got to drive him out. And if he shows fight--" Chuck dabbed his rope and yanked a sage-bush four feet in the air. "We string him up."

"It ain't right to hurt nobody," Einar says, scratching his head carefully with one hand while balancing the gun with the other.

Well, right then Chuck and me closed in on Einar, and pulled him up. "Now lookit," Chuck said waving a finger in Einar's pink face. "It's your place as the sheep is running over. You asked us for help. Now you talk about backing out, of opening negotiations instead of a charge. Are you with us or agin us?"

Einar blushed the way them squareheads do, they're so blond. "Maybe I don't savvy things so good," he says. "You

nice fellers to help."

"All right then!" Chuck said. "Take my word--what we need is a good charge. Here, have a drink."

"All right," Einar says, taking a long pull. "You're the Injun fighter."

Well, pretty soon we came to a butte that was on Einar's land. On the far side of it was Rock Creek and the sheep. "Wagon's acrost the creek," Einar said. "No need to touch that."

"All right, men!" Chuck straightened in the saddle and tried to look like General Grant. "Deploy."

Nobody moved on account of nobody knew what he was talking about, so Chuck shows us how we were to charge over the ridge with him on the right flank, me on the left, and Einar in the center.

"Now we advance up the ridge real quiet," Chuck says, "until we almost reach the top. But keep out of sight until you hear me blow the charge on my bugle. Then let her rip. Me and Slim'll shoot, but maybe you better not let that gun go off while you're running," he said to Einar. I thought maybe he better not let it go off when he was walking either. It kicked like a bronc. But I had a feeling Einar didn't want to shoot it noways.

"All right, deploy," says Chuck, "and may the god of battles be with us." He was feeling real good now.

Well, I spread out to the left up toward the mountain. Chuck rode off toward the river, posting in the saddle like a cavalry trooper. Looked to me like he ought to be carrying one of them guidon flags. Ole Einar, he just set there on his work horse, balancing that buffalo gun on the pommel.

When I thought I was far enough away from him, I started walking my old sorrel up the ridge. At first it was plumb quiet. A rock chuck seen me and beat it for his hole. An old magpie in a cottonwood tree made a lot of dirty remarks as I rode by, and a couple of rabbits loped off for Montana at the sound of my clanking sword.

I looked off to my right and seen Chuck working his way up the ridge, waiting for Einar to get in line. Einar was kicking the old work horse trying to make him climb. I was feeling so good up to now, having had a pull at the red eye now and then, that I hadn't thought much about the danger of running other people's sheep. But right then I suddenly wished I was doing my irrigating. From over the hill I could hear the dogs barking, and the sheep holding a grand palaver of baaing and grunting. I didn't like it.

But when I looked over at Chuck, and saw him sitting just below the ridge top, his rope in one hand, the bugle in the other, I gave myself a talking to. "There is a fine figure of a man," I says. "He is not scared to rush into battle. All your life you wished you'd been an Injun fighter.

Many is the time you thought how you could take a scalp yourself. And now here's your chance."

I think it was the sword that helped my courage to return. I drew it forth from my belt, and the blade shone in the sun. I made a few passes through the air, and the swishing sound carried a lot of authority.

Then as old Einar pulled into line at last, I saw Chuck wave his bugle, and I knew that the battle of Rock Creek was coming whether I liked it or not. I drew my gun and pulled back the hammer. "To arms!" I mumbled.

Then through the clear mountain air came the call of the bugle, only it was kind of a bleat like a steer makes when you tail him up in a Chinook. I spurred my horse over the ridge.

Well, Einar hadn't exaggerated none. Out there on the flat just this side of the creek bottom was over a hundred sheep, a couple of dogs, and Joe Moccasin Foot squatting down in the midst of them, with his horse standing nearby. There must have been more than five hundred yards between us and the herd.

Maybe it was because I was sure now that there wasn't nobody around but Moccasin Foot, but anyway the charge took a-hold of me. I hear Chuck let out a yip as he run his horse down the ridge, and as I jumped the old sorrel into a lope I yelled like mad and let go with the gun. First thing I knew

I was on the flat, and my fighting blood was up. Anyway, it was that or the red eye, on account I was standing in the saddle, the sword in one hand, the gun in the other, and the reins in my teeth.

It was a very successful charge, and Chuck had a right to be proud of it. He was yelling like a whole band of Ogalalla Sioux, and trying to blow the bugle again without knocking his teeth out. The only trouble was that the distance between us and the herd was too long. The sheep had warning and vamoosed acrost the creek so fast that we never even got a chance at their tail feathers. And in front of them, riding like he was shot out of a cannon, was old Joe Moccasin Foot. Chuck made a long throw at an old ewe galloping acrost the creek and missed. And that was the end of the battle.

Chuck pulled in his rope real disgusted. "Nothing to it," he said. "None of 'em would stand and fight."

"They run like sheep," I said thoughtlessly.

About this time Einar came lumbering up, beating on his old work horse. He hadn't kept up, and you couldn't really say he'd been in the charge at all. He'd spent most of his time trying to keep the buffalo gun from blowing him out of the saddle.

"Well," Chuck said, trying to keep up appearances. "Due to tactical surprise the field is won." But his heart

wasn't in it, and there wasn't any more whiskey either.

"Huh?" Einar grunts. "This ain't half a charge. We gotta run Moccasin Foot further'n this."

We looked at him in surprise. Darned if even liquor didn't run through him at half speed! And now that it was over, this idea of a charge had at last took a-hold of him. "Come on, boys," he shouts. "Deploy!"

"You mean you want us to charge right into the Widow's ranch?" Chuck asks.

"You boys is afeard," Einar shouts. "This here's a war like you said. I'm a-going to charge some more even if you have to blow the bugle over me like I was dead."

Well, that was a long speech for Einar. His big face was all redded. He kept yanking that old horse's mouth, and waving the gun around so much we got to ducking for fear he'd kill us both.

I could see Chuck didn't like to have any old square-head nester out-dare him. But he and I had better sense than to shoot up the Widow's ranch. We was setting there real thoughtful, listening to Einar call us all kinds of names when suddenly I heard something that sounded like a baby crying, and looking down behind a sagebush, I seen a wiggly little old lamb. He was trying to get to his feet, and he sure was hollering for his mom.

"Doggone!" Chuck points to another one staggering

around like he was drunk. "It must be lambing time!"

I got down off my horse and grabbed me a sheep about big enough to bait a fish hook with. Chuck gets off, too, and finds him another baby, and starts petting it like it was a kitten. "They'll all die," he says, real serious, "without no mamas."

But there was no explaining this to Einar. "Serves 'em right," he says. "They should have stayed on their own side of the creek."

Chuck kind of choked up from the dust or something. "But they was borned here," he says. "They couldn't help where they was borned!"

I looked around and counted eight of them gangly lambs weaving around worse'n a bunch of drunk cowboys in town after a long winter. Sitting there with that little feller in my arms, I worried. If them lambs died, old Katie would get the sheriff on us and no mistake. I looked acrost to where Chuck was squatting, and I see he has the same thoughts.

But of course while I was just fretting, he had an idea. "All right, Einar," he says at last. "You want a charge, and you got one. We'll pour it on plum into the widow's yard. That good enough for you?"

"Hurry up," Einar says, wiggling them blond eyebrows. "Deploy."

I looked at Chuck and shook my head. "So long," I says. "I'll visit you down to the state pen. I'll bake a file into some sourdough and slip it to you. You can then escape--maybe."

"You're in this, too," Chuck says, winking at me hard, and picking up one of the lambs. "I aim to charge and return these here lambs at the same time. Hook on to a couple of 'em, and we'll tie 'em to the saddlestrings."

I see the point now, but Einar don't and asks why.

"Where is your honor as a officer and a gentleman?" Chuck asks, getting into the spirit of the thing again. "This is war, Einar. War to the death, like you say. But it ain't against women and children. And you got to admit that these here lambs is innocent, newly-borned non-combytants."

This speech was so stirring that even Einar had to agree, even though he didn't quite understand it.

So Chuck and me spent the next ten minutes wrangling around in the sagebrush and bulldogging lambs, until finally we had the whole mess of 'em loaded. Each one of us had one in front and another behind the saddle, and me and Chuck carried another acrost the pommel. We didn't dare trust Einar to balance that gun and a lamb, too,

Well, when we finally crossed the creek, we sure didn't sound like no war party, and what with the baaing and

squealing, we made more noise than a camp meeting. We circled the country where the sheep was by now, and as we got near the Widow's ranch, Chuck pulled up. "From here we charge," he says. "Run plumb up to the Widow's front door, and drop them lambs like they was loaded dice. When the Widow comes out, Einar, you make a solemn speech. She knows you ain't a cowhand like us. She'll take you serious. You warn her to keep them smelly sheep on her side of the creek. Give it to her, Einar. It's your big chance."

"I can't speech anybody," Einar said. The whiskey was dying in him, and he was losing some of his warlike temper.

"Talk fast," Chuck says. "We done our best for you, Slim and me, but we ain't waiting for Mike McClurg to throw down on us with a .44. So speech her good, Einar. Pour it on." So saying, Chuck spurred his bronc. "Forward, men!" he shouted, and we broke into a dead run--sheep and all.

Well, I often wonder what the folks on that ranch thought was coming. Over the sound of the thundering hoofs was the squalling of them poor lambs feeling the pinch of them saddlestrings, and over <u>that</u> comes the master bleat of all, like the great granddaddy of all the sheep that ever was--the squirty sound of Chuck's bugle.

We came through the ranch gate like the devil was twisting our tail, and pulled up at the main house in a cloud

of dust. Me and Chuck dropped our lambs down so fast they hit the ground before the horses come full stop. But that was easy. The trouble come with the other lambs tied to the saddle strings.

First I got tangled up in that darn sword, and couldn't get at the lamb tied over my slicker. Then my pony got snuffy, feeling them sheep tickling his legs, and went to pitching. Time I got his head up, one lamb had broke loose, and the other was riding double with me.

About then the door slams open and there's the Widow, madder'n a bull in fly time. "What goes on here?" she shouts.

Chuck is still struggling with his last lamb, but he yells, "Speech her, Einar! Speech her!"

At the same time, I see a feller running toward us from the corrals. He was packing a forty-four. Then here comes Mike McClurg around from the back with a double-barreled shotgun. It looked to me like I better move out of there or give up my sword in surrender, and I wasn't sure them fellers knew the honorable rules of war.

"Beat it!" I yelled.

"Vamoose!" Chuck hollers, dropping his last lamb, and spinning his bronc.

I took one look at Einar, and I seen right then that he was through. He had a lamb and his slicker and his gun all mixed up together. I figgered if he was lucky, he might

shoot the slicker, wear the lamb and drop the gun. But his chances weren't good.

"Mike! Joe!" the Widow shouts. "Catch these fellers. They're stealing sheep!"

I heard Einar answer, but it was kind of faint on account I was a quarter of a mile away. "No we ain't," he says. "They're non-combytants."

Then Einar's gun blew the front windows out of the ranch house, and him out of the saddle.

I was too far away to see any more, because we was beating one of the fastest strategic retreats in the history of warfare. It was masterly--from the Widow's ranch to the back room of the Elkhorn in less than two hours!

. . . . . .

The victory celebration lasted two or three days longer than we figured, on account Einar wasn't there to pay our fines, and when we rode back up the South Fork we was feeling kind of low. We knew that with the war over there wasn't anything left to do but build corrals, a house, a barn, a decent fence line, and dig irrigation ditches and a lot of other things soldiers shouldn't never do. We didn't like the idea, and it wasn't until we come over a rise to Rock Creek where Einar's pasture started that we brightened up. Dogged if the place wasn't crawling with sheep!

"Aha!" Chuck shouts happily, and run his pony up to

the sheep wagon. "War ain't over after all. Come out of there Moccasin Foot!"

Well, old Joe came out, but behind him was Einar. He limped some, and he walked like he was kind of sounding out each step before he took it--but he was getting around. "War's over," he said. "Me and Moccasin Foot smoke peace pipe. Everything skookum."

"Why?" Chuck asked, the smile fading from under his whiskers.

"I hurt my rump," Einar said. "The Widow's been looking after it."

"That so?"

"She says you cowboys caused the war."

"She did, huh?" Chuck twisted his whiskers angrily.

"Uh huh, and she was real proud about how I brung in them lambs."

"How you brung 'em in!"

"Yep! We're going to run sheep on my place. And Moccasin Foot's my friend now. He stands up with me."

"You mean you still can't sit down?" Chuck asks.

"No," Einar shook his head patiently. "The Widow and me got hitched yesterday."

"Well, I'll be dogged. . . ." Chuck tried to be cordial, but it sure hurt him. "Congratulations," he says. "That's sure fine."

"Yah," I says. "That's sure great. But don't let her pull the wool over your eyes."

Well, we slapped Einar on the back kind of half-hearted, and Chuck finally got himself to shake hands with old Moccasin Foot to show he had buried the hatchet. But all the rest of the way home Chuck never says a word. Now and then he tries to ride his military seat, like an old soldier coming home from the wars. But mostly he slumped over the horn. I says, "Look, Chuck. She's just made a fool of that Einar. She married him for his range grass."

Chuck just shook his head. Something pretty serious had happened to him. His pride was hurt. He was a man of ideas. And now this Einar, the slowest mind ever seen on the South Fork, had beat him out. Marrying that rich widow would mean quitting work for good; that had been an ambition of Chuck's ever since he could remember. But it just never occurred to him to marry that woman--and it sure was humiliating!

EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Walter Johnson, a commonplace-looking man in his forties, wearing an overcoat and a gray snap-brim hat, leaned against the iron railing across the street from the church and watched the parishioners--bundled against the cold--arrive for the Morning Prayer and Sermon. He didn't much want to go through all the rigmarole of kneeling, standing, sitting and kneeling again that made up the Episcopalian service, but he was a man who usually kept his word, and he had half-promised the warden, an old friend of his father's, to attend a service before leaving town.

It was a simple little church with a steep roof to shed the snow, and except for the bell tower pointing timidly into a flat, gray sky, it was covered entirely with ancient, curling, brown-stained shingles. Walter thought that the local architect must have hated the cold so much that his church, instead of aspiring heavenward, shrank back into the snow, a refuge from the interminable Adirondack winter.

Even from a distance Walter remembered a few of the parishioners. Eighty-year-old Mr. Potter, arriving in his Lincoln, covered to the ears in fur, was escorted into the church by his chauffeur. He saw William LeBeau, the furnace man, who warmed all the better people from Highland Park, and there was the timeless Miss Bronson, the church's private

saint, who tenderly washed the priest's vestments and served the altar with flowers, and who, only last week, had tried to shame Walter into coming to a service. All of them seemed to him to be remnants of a life he had not known for thirty years--all aged in the wood among the rotting shingles of the building in front of him.

Walter's steel-rimmed glasses were so cold that they hurt him behind his ears, and his feet were growing numb. He was just turning, still undecided, when he saw the warden wave to him, and he realized he was in for it.

It was the smell that disturbed his memory first--a smell made up of too-dry heat from the hot air register in the middle of the aisle, combined with coal gas, melting snow from overshoes, the dry powder of elderly women, sachet from bureau drawers, small boys sweating in their best suits, gloves and cassocks and cottas and old people--uniting always into the single smell of "church."

The congregation was small, there was plenty of room, and without thinking he found himself taking off his coat in the fourth pew on the left, in front of the pulpit. He pretended to kneel briefly by sitting forward and resting his forehead on the pew in front.

Then, as he settled himself to wait, he felt from all around him the cold impact of eyes--old, inquiring eyes. Are you a parishioner? they asked. Or should we remember you

from the old days? Why are you in the fourth pew? Why are you alone? Who are you? Do you belong? You're welcome--but you're strange, a meet subject for speculation.

After more than twenty-five years, he thought, only a few would know him, and turning slightly, he glanced across the aisle at Miss Bronson. She nodded her head with a slight, proud sign of recognition, indicating her approval of his return to the fold, and approval of herself, too, because she thought she was responsible. She knew, though. She remembered when his father had been rector of the church--a great rector, she had said, and there had never been another like him. No wonder she was happy to bring in a straying lamb.

He turned his head away, and settled down to the expected boredom. Staring at the empty pulpit, he recognised the three brass clover designs that supported the front of it. A rod served as the stem of each clover, and three leaves of narrow brass looped outward from it, holding up the rail above. The thing to do was to take out that brass rod which had a sort of maple leaf knob on the end. It could be used as a sceptor if you were pretending to be a king, or as a battle axe if you preferred to be a knight. It had the weight in the right place; you could really slug somebody with it. . . .

Walter smiled to himself. Even the pattern of his childhood boredom had returned. That was what he had always

thought, sitting there in a Buster Brown collar that hurt his neck, while his aunt, firm in her Victorian bust and Queen Mary hat, watched him from the corner of her eye in the hope of being able to say, "Shh!"

The chancel had been remodeled, he noticed, but Faith, Hope and Charity, three stained glass windows, still rose above the altar. Faith, or was it Hope, leaned heavily upon a large anchor, and Charity held a child against the folds of her gown, stuffing him against his will with oatmeal.

His eyes moved onward to the organist, and he was not in the least startled to find that she was the same woman, sitting in the same hunched position, pulling and pushing the same old plugs in the same old organ--no change, no difference.

The change was all outside, he thought, in the way of living, thinking, being. Or to these people was it so different? They seemed to him to be the adults of his childhood, except that they were older, of course, smaller and less formidable than when he had been, say, ten years old.

Well, he was middle-aged now, and if he was honest he would have to admit that he didn't amount to any more than these people sitting around him. He was from another generation, that was all, from a different mediocrity, with a wife he took for granted, children who made him nervous, a job that sapped his energy, and a driving need to make the amount

of money he should be making at his age.

He moved restlessly in his seat. Outside in the covered runway that ran from the parish house, the choir was assembling, coughing in the frosty air, shivering in their cotton cassocks.

Tardy arrivals slunk hurriedly down the aisle hunting seats. He had never been late as a child because his father had to reach the parish house in time to prepare himself for the service.

He found suddenly that he could remember those Sunday mornings. . . . The Buster Brown collar and the black flowing tie which required help from his mother. . . the garters that ran from his underwear to his stockings, and the tight patent leather shoes. . . . Once mastered, they were followed by the heavy coat, overshoes, mittens on a string, and a toque with a tassel that hung down behind. . . and always behind his own annoyance he felt the worries of his hypertensioned aunt. She it was who called Ed's Livery Stable earlier than necessary to demand a sleigh, and again it was she who called asking why it hadn't arrived. She was invariably informed that it had "just left," and when it did come she was never ready.

When they stepped outdoors at last, into the deep quiet of the snow, he always stopped long enough to hear the rhythmic, jogging lyric of the bells. Every horse that drew

a sleigh carried them, numbers of them all around its belly, or just one or two big ones perched above its neck.

Once in a while Ed sent the Russian sleigh, a bright red contraption with seats facing each other, and with a scarlet, woolen pompom on each side of the driver to lend a strangely festive air. Still waiting for his aunt, he and his mother and father climbed into the seats and snuggled under the musty buffalo robes, searching with their feet for the pre-heated soapstones on the floor.

He was rather enjoying himself among his memories, when suddenly the organ crashed into the processional--"The Church's One Foundation." He stood up with the rest, as a pimply lad entered carrying the processional cross, followed by the choir. It all seemed so much the same that he would not have been surprised to see his mother in the alto section just before the men, and his father, lean, aristocratic, his moustache waxed to the finest points, bringing up the rear.

Among the sopranos were several young girls. One in particular caught his eye, for he could see that under her cassock and cotta she had a pleasant figure. Her eyes, large and brown and quite lovely, lifted for an instant from her hymnal and glanced across the congregation--not spiritual eyes, he thought, and not predatory, just speculative. Choir girls hadn't changed much either, although his attitude toward

them must be different.

Or was it? At ten, with his hair plastered flat, his aunt watchful, his mother and father in front of him in the chancel, had he not yearned hopelessly, inarticulately for a choir girl? Was he still following the same pattern?

He smiled as he hurriedly hunted through the hymn book for the right number. Sure, he had wanted a choir girl, and if only somewhere along the line he had had one, the world might have been a much more glorious, uninhibited adventure. . .

"Almighty God and most merciful father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep" (with a choir girl). The minister, reading the General Confession, did not resemble his father in any way. He was heavy, with a paunch that swelled his vestments, and he read the service in such a colorless voice that the words were almost meaningless. His father--he could almost hear him--used ringing tones, not quite chanting the service, but projecting his voice as though speaking in an echoing cathedral. It carried authority and power. He remembered one compelling phrase from the communion service. "It is meet. . . right. . . and our <u>bounden</u> <u>duty</u>. . . ."

Sitting there, leaning forward, he thought of his father's religion. His father and mother knew, believed, felt all this, past all argument. They had given their lives

to it, not thinking about whether it was true or untrue, any more than he queried the fact that he found music beautiful and poetry enthralling. It was so--like spring, or the row of sunflowers that turned with the sun, down by the path that led to the tennis court.

If you could take it like music or poetry. . . . But come to think of it, he hadn't heard many concerts or read much verse in recent years. That was the trouble--you couldn't go back. . . .

He had been following the service automatically, standing and sitting and pretending to kneel. He listened to the choir sing the Venite: "Oh-come. . . . Let-us-sing . . . . unto the Lord. . . Let-us-heartily-rejoice. . . in the strength of our salvashun. . . ."--lagging behind, it always seemed to him, then suddenly singing a lot of words fast, as though to catch up with the melody. He let his mind wander, rambling over old patterns, bits of thought, remnants of old boredoms. . . .

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. . . Amen." The minister had mounted the pulpit in front of him.

The sermon was canned; Walter felt sure of it. Bought from a syndicate, it was safe and meaningless, and delivered in a tone which said, "I have talked like this for years past, and I'll continue until I retire. I don't get paid

much for it, so, meantime, as Christians please behave yourselves."

It hadn't been that way with his father, who hated preaching and worked for days on his sermons. After the service his underwear was wringing with sweat, and Mother had to make him change it before he could venture into the winter air.

Walter was glad that the sermon was colorless. It gave him a chance to sit peacefully and continue his thoughts, which were becoming vivid and enchanting to him. He realized now that ever since he had arrived in the village, he had been prowling around it, looking for something that would bring back his childhood. He had even climbed the steep hill to the house where he had grown to adolescence, but all the memories were faded, like badly projected, underlighted films. The house held another story now, coddled another brood, prepared them for another destiny.

But here. . . . He glanced at the still faces of the choir in the dimmed light of the chancel, at the communion candlesticks given to the church in memory of his uncle, at the processional cross glinting in the shadows, marked with the name of an older brother who had died before he could be remembered. . . .

It was all so familiar, so a part of a forgotten childhood that he felt like a man returning home after a

long journey. It proved that you never could get away from your background entirely--from the things your family loved and valued. It was foolish, sentimental--but he was beginning to enjoy this feeling of rest and peacefulness in a twilit church.

As he sat there, with the platitudes of the minister meaningless in his ears, he became aware of a strange warmth, suffusing him with a feeling of almost unbearable happiness. This increased minute by minute until he felt as though his mind and body were undergoing a gentle, definite, atomic change. He saw new meanings. New patterns opened up before him, and they became so important that his own hidden fears, his worries about his health and his business, his old guilts, and the dark faceless terrors he held beneath the surface of his mind, all faded and dwindled into unimportance.

And at the same time, him <u>own</u> mind, the one he used every day, seemed to rush to join the new sensations. You're facing truth, it said. Hurry! Catch up with it. Reason fast. This moment will fulfill you, if only you can believe in it. And why not? Has every Christian since the time of Jesus been wrong, all wrong--all but you with your unbelief? No one, not even Dad, asked you to believe theology, or original sin, or the garbage of human dogmas. But this. . . this feeling. . . this <u>knowing</u>. . . .

Suddenly, he remembered a night long ago when he had

awakened from a childhood nightmare and heard a scratching on his bedroom window. Terror, from the dream, from the scratching sound, forced him to turn slowly toward the danger, and there, lit by the reflected glow from a street lamp, he saw the tip of a tree branch. Twigs covered with a jeweled snow moved slightly against the pane. . . and then the dream was gone, and he was safe, and he felt the slender limb become part of him and he was part of it--the friendly hand of God reaching through his window.

He hardly noticed when the clergyman finished his sermon. He saw two old men, erect, silver-haired, in stiff collars and dark suits, walk with the bent knees of age up the aisle for the collection plates. They were old and calm and wise, he thought. They knew.

"Let us pray." He felt himself go all the way down on his knees this time. ("There are only two ways of praying," his father had said, "standing and kneeling.")

He didn't pray <u>for</u> anything. He only joined the other prayers that he could feel rising around him, becoming part of him, making his eyes burn. His prayer was a part of Miss Bronson's, who, old and strange as she was, knew something that he had only just learned. He was glad to be here with her, and with rich old Mr. Potter, who wanted to go on living until the end of time, and with old Lebeau, the furnace man, who was tired, worn out, puzzled about how to keep the fires

up, how to serve another year. They were all joined in a democracy, all part of the same. . . .

The priest was giving the blessing, standing in front of the altar, his arm raised. And words from the communion service drifted across Walter's mind. . . . "The peace of God, which passeth all understanding. . . be amongst you, and remain with you. . . always."

. . . . . .

After the long pause, the organ started the recessional, a hymn he didn't know and didn't care for. He stood up and pretended to sing. The crucifer passed him, then the women. Once again, the pretty one raised her head and glanced over the congregation, and he was only vaguely aware of her. But then the men were passing, and as the women entered the doorway into the open, the men tried to hurry them so that they would all reach the outside in time to avoid singing another verse in the cold.

But they didn't quite make it, and half choking in the winter air, they sang one more, flatting below the organ until they dribbled off, raggedly at the end.

Again the congregation sank to its knees. The priest mumbled something, and the choir sang a hurried, off key "amen" and scuttled for the warmth of the parish house. The clergyman came back through the door, and walked up past the altar where, out of sight of the congregation, he removed his

stole and surplice.

Walter waited restlessly. He wanted to get away, to think over what had happened to him, to be alone.

Then the clergyman appeared again, and walked past the congregation, down the aisle to the front entrance, and the congregation rose and broke into whispering people, fumbling for overshoes, coats, scarves. . . .

Walter hunched into his coat, and moving as fast as he dared, he avoided Miss Bronson, and mumbling "Excuse me," and "I'm sorry," threaded his way past those who might have remembered him. The priest stood at the door, and as Walter tried to pass, held out his hand. Walter took it, felt the soft, cold, impersonal pressure, and looked up into the cloudy, bluish eyes.

"My father was rector here once," Walter murmured. "I enjoyed the service."

"Thank you. . . Thank you. . . " The clergyman dropped his hand without interest, and turned to the next person.

Walter hurried down the steps, past anyone who might know him, and, with the glow of revelation still warm in him, he crossed the ice-covered street.

He had walked a full block before the thought occurred to him, making him slow his pace and finally stop. He turned and gazed back uncertainly in the direction from which he had come. Had he been fooled by a childhood ritual? Had he been

following old patterns back through time to a feeling of infantile security? Was it all only an illusion to mock himself with on a lonely Sunday afternoon? As he looked at the church squatting there in the snow bank under a leaden sky, it reminded him of a small brown hen with a few last chicks crawling from under her mouldering wing.

THE LONG WAIT

Although the letters glinted along the edges from the light of the street lamp, Gordon Talbot couldn't make them out. The dignified little bronze sign might read "J. W. Destiny, M.D." or even "Dr. Jehovah, Fates Decided While You Wait," for that was his job, Gordon thought, even though his name was Dr. Burroughs.

Bare tree branches, stirred by a frozen wind, made vague, clawing shadows on the snow-covered lawn, beckoning Gordon who stood with his hands in his pockets, his overcoat heavy on his hunched shoulders. This was the moment he had feared. It was what he had been waiting for and fighting against. It had speeded his pulse, clutched his heart, ravaged his dreams--yet now that the instant had arrived, he was in no hurry, and he was not even very much afraid. He didn't understand why, and he needed this moment to gather himself into Gordon Talbot again, to try to figure it out. . . .

That morning had been like every other. He had been only vaguely aware of Nurse Monahan entering his porch, closing the window and pulling up the shades. He knew that she glanced at the little empty cup by his bedside to see if he had taken the sleeping pill. Then he had heard her say "Good morning!" as usual, and rustle from the room.

Because of the seconal, Gordon woke up slowly and stretched, enjoying the results of seven hours of relaxing sleep, and the feeling that another day was already partly over, passing swiftly and silently. . . with no new problems . . . nothing to worry about--

Only there was something! Underneath the surface of his consciousness he was aware of it--a familiar bubble of fear rising. He was going to have to remember. He might as well get on with it. The X-ray! That's what it was--the X-ray. Today, surely, he would hear. Dr. Burroughs would come in and say, "Talbot, it's a good one. It's wonderful. I'm delighted with you." Or using a different tone, "There's some improvement, Talbot. But that little cavity's still there. And I think that we ought to consider pretty carefully the thought of surgery. . . ." Well, anyway, Gordon thought, slipping into his robe, the worry was out in the open where he could fight it.

He returned from the bathroom in time to see the maid arrive with his breakfast. She was a fat little woman with sad eyes and a round wig so large for her that Gordon thought the faintest breeze would spin it like a top or parachute it, light as thistledown, to the floor. "Good news, Mr. Talbot," she chirped happily, "Toast today, <u>French</u> toast."

"I don't know how you do it," Gordon said, trying to

seem delighted. "Nobody, nobody on earth but you could convince that witch in the kitchen to have toast a la Francaise." As usual she was pleased, and her eyes lit up. Once, in the distant past, Gordon had liked French toast, and when he had arrived at Adirondack San he had mentioned it. She had launched her campaign immediately and had carried it on with such vigor, that, much to her delight, she had been nicknamed Mrs. Toast by everybody.

Gordon ate his breakfast from the bed table listlessly, forcing himself for her sake to finish up the cold, soggy stuff flooded with fake maple syrup. He knew that this was going to be a tough day, and he was trying to prepare for it. This very minute down at his main office, Dr. Burroughs might be looking at the X-ray, hunting through the upper section of the left side for that black hole not much bigger than a .22 caliber bullet. He might be looking relieved--for he had a deep interest in his patients--or he might be on the phone calling Dr. Calwell, the surgeon. "Could you come over, Calwell? I want you to look at Talbot's picture. It seems to me that if we took three ribs on the left side--"

Gordon pushed the breakfast tray away from him and tried to read a novel, but the words had no meaning for him, and he waited for the one further event that might take his mind off himself. Charlotte Monahan would come in to make the bed.

And what was the use of thinking about her? he wondered. She was just a widow approaching middle-age, with a plain Irish face, a too-wide mouth, and blonde hair that got pretty well mussed by the time the morning was over. If you met her in New York, you wouldn't look twice. She wouldn't get a lewd whistle out of a Seventh Avenue bum. But lie around this damn san long enough and she looked as appealing as a Powers model with a new screen contract.

To be honest about it, Gordon thought--He had been doing that lately, being very honest, trying to see everything as bad, horrible, painful, hopeless, thinking that if he could turn everything black enough, his dark gray life might look good. To be honest, she knows too damn much about me. She has me spotted as a neurotic, and she's still embarrassed at what happened last time. . . . But it won't happen again.

His mind was distracted by a noise from the next room. He had heard it a number of times in the last twenty-four hours, the sound of some kind of motor. He was wondering vaguely what it was when Charlotte Monahan arrived, a clean sheet over her arm.

"Sleep well?" she asked, as if she didn't know.

"Wonderfully," Gordon said, slipping out of bed and into a chair. "How can you help it in this clean, crisp Adirondack air?"

She pushed the bed table aside, cleared away the mess of papers and books and cleaned the ashtrays, her strong fingers so light and quick that Gordon thought them beautiful to watch.

"Eleven butts!" she said, holding up a tray. "That's one over your allowance. I shall report it to the doctor."

"There's a quart of liquor under the mattress, too," he said, remembering the famous story of the patient who received liquor smuggled in to him by a taxi driver. Charlotte had caught the driver, finally, slipping a pint under the covers. Eyes blazing, she drove him from the house. Then somenow she had made the patient promise her to drink no more. He hadn't either--nor, so far as anyone knew, had she ever told his doctor on him.

"Another thing." She was leaning over the bed now, her back to him, and Gordon allowed himself to appreciate the legs and the shape of her pleasant little behind. "There's a rumor out that you're trying to seduce Mrs. Toast. The patients think it would be a very good thing for Mrs. Toast." Deftly she turned the sheet in a hospital corner. "But it would not be good for <u>you</u>. Furthermore, and more important to us all, your influence on Mrs. Toast is causing Cook to complain. She would like to fry eggs for a change."

"Blessings on cook," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

She was always like that, full of chatter. But lately she had seemed nervous around him, and he knew why. She was afraid he'd talk about it again. But he wouldn't He'd fight this one alone, thanks. She needn't worry.

"What other gossip?" he asked to make conversation. She was facing him now, and he could see that she was becoming disheveled early this morning. He enjoyed the color in her cheeks, and the wide mouth drawn just a little bit down, giving her a rather comic look of severity.

"Cathy Bernstein has been upped for outside exercise again. Ten minutes a day. Mrs. Jameson is moving to the Godwin Cottage because the girls next door tell dirty stories after lights."

"Who can blame them?"

"No one," she said, twisting a little smile at him. "They get 'em from you."

Although it seemed to Gordon that she had only been on his porch for a moment or two, she was finished now--and it looked so different, clean, and the bed cool, and everything within reach.

She turned down the bed covers. "Hop in and go to work," she said. "You've never finished that lovely necklace for your wife."

"A foolish trinket, a gew-gaw," he said, crawling in. She knew--damn her--she knew he couldn't read while waiting

for the X-ray. She thought making wire jewelry the way the therapist had taught him, would help him to keep his mind off himself.

"What's that motor running next door? Putting in a machine shop?"

She was already in the doorway and turned, reluctant to answer. "No," she said. "Just a pump." The door closed gently.

A pump! Gordon lay back on his pillows. She hadn't wanted to tell him about it, of course, not today. But there was only one reason for a pump. . . and that was as a drain. Old lady Windrow had had her ribs out, and now she must have fluid, and they had given her a Minaldi--that was what they called this pump.

Gordon turned over in his bed and gazed out the window. It was beginning to get him. Lying there with nothing he had to do, no other worry, no other responsibility, his mind was intent on beating him up in spite of himself. And the body was responding, pulling up his respiration and his pulse. And at noon Charlotte Monahan would take his pulse and know, and not say anything. Maybe he would even run a temp.

It made him furious. He thrashed around and tried to think of something else--something simple and concrete like the snow bank outside his window. During the fall he had

enjoyed that slope. It had been full of life and action. Robins and sparrows roamed around devouring insects. The weeds had grown high and tried to choke some tiny evergreens the management had planted in a vain effort to stop erosion. Rain had drained away the soft loam around them, and he had watched three of the little pines lose the battle, seen the ends of their branches turn brown in gradual death. The others, he thought, still had a fifty-fifty chance, now that the weeds had gone. This morning the little pines were covered with snow right up to their tips, and Gordon thought they lay like patients waiting under a white sheet, resting, curing, holding life down under the blanket of snow until a spring sun could bring back their vitality.

There was no real interest in the bank, no life, no movement, no color anywhere, except the gray drabness of the sky, and the uniformly dark, varnished brown of his porch. There was nothing to take his mind off the heavy, hammering blows of his pulse.

Gordon sat up and decided to do battle with his nervous body. If you could estimate the past and the present, it might be possible to work out some pattern for the future, for that was what a man needed, a pattern, a scheme, something to plan for while he waited for the time when he could start living again.

Gordon Talbot at forty-one, Gordon Talbot said to

himself, had been generally considered a promising executive. As Assistant Advertising Manager of the Continental Typewriter Company he had a pretty good salary, a small but darned attractive house in Plandome, a good-looking wife, and one boy almost ten years old. It was a nice shiny life, from the new Dodge to the chromium trim on the deep freeze unit.

Every morning he caught the Eight-thirty-seven. At Penn Station he took the subway to Times Square and then shuttled over to Grand Central, or if he felt like it he walked. In the office he was considered a good "idea man" who could keep the advertising agency that handled the Continental account on its toes. Even though he didn't mix in the social life of his office friends, he knew they thought he was a good guy.

Week-ends, he worked in the garden, tried to repair things around the house, mowed the lawn, and meeting with his neighbors, did some drinking--social drinking, like everybody else.

He was a success. Every raise told him, "Mister, you're good." And his pay checks kept right on coming to him here in bed, telling him that even if he didn't do his work he was still considered valuable, still able to live up to his responsibilities. The boys in the office had faith in him; he had a big store of good-will to draw on. It was something to be proud of.

He stirred in his bed restlessly. . . . Yet sometime, some place--when was it?--as the years passed and he stood on the train, and stood on the subway, and sat in his office, or lay on the couch at home having a rest and a quick snort before dinner--the life had drained out, and he began to feel empty as all hell.

Was it because his passion for Betty had faded? She was nice and conventional--in bed and out. She had energy left over, after his was all gone, and though he had kept on trying, they drifted away from each other. This was conventional, too, he thought. You could see it all around you.

Yet most of the time he was too tired to care. Now and then he and young Benny would take a long walk together. He missed that damn kid with his cap pistols and his comics, and once in a while the bits of dreams he turned loose about being a cowboy or seeing distant lands. . . .

And when he had been with the boy, a faint nostalgic whiff of past ambition would drift through him. He would remember college, and writing verse. Once in a while he would even pick up a pencil. But the mood never lasted.

Betty took up social work, and PTA, and women's clubs, and only once in a while--after a few drinks on a week-end--they would come together hard, even angrily. Even that seemed rather wonderful right now.

Loneliness is strange, he thought, because there seems

to be no reason for it. He and Betty loved each other; yet when they were together nothing happened any more. Maybe it was because he was too tired, and he just couldn't bother to fight his way across the line, to make the effort.

Of course the tiredness had scared him at last and he went to a doctor, who took an X-ray and sent him to a specialist.

"What you need is a good long rest," the specialist said.

"Amen," Gordon answered. "How long?"

"Oh. . . say, about six months. You must get away from the boy. You're a bit germy. Nothing too bad, of course. I'll send you up to the Adirondacks to Dr. Burroughs. He's a good man."

"What you need is a good rest," said Dr. Burroughs.

"I know," Gordon said. "How long?"

"You better be quiet for, say, about six months," said the doctor, "and start with a few weeks of complete bed-rest."

Gordon turned away from the bank and stared at his calender. He smiled a little. It was five months this Wednesday.

He remembered the terrifying feeling of finality when he took off his clothes that first night and crawled into a narrow bed on a bare porch with no sure knowledge of when he

would get up again.

Charlotte Monahan had folded his clothes and put them away neatly, finally, in a bureau drawer. "Take your temperature at noon and four and eight," she said, putting the thermometer in the little bottle by his bedside.

"Thanks." He tried to relax his muscles against the rather hard mattress. "I wonder whether you would mind ordering me a martini, very dry."

"It will be a long wait." The note of kindness in her voice made him look up.

She gave him a professional, friendly glance, and turned away. "I'll get you something that will relax you, though. You need sleep."

He remembered how glad he had been to swallow the seconal, and how he had lain there for a long time, close to the wall, thinking of a sick dog he had owned as a child. It had crawled under the porch, and it wouldn't come out because it couldn't be a dog any more.

"You are very lucky," Nurse Monahan said the next morning. "You have bathroom privileges."

"I don't enjoy going to the bathroom much," Gordon said. "That's for older people."

"You just don't realize a good break when you get it," she said. "I remember a boy here who used the bed pan for a whole year. One day a friend called up to him from the

street, 'Hey, Joe, how was your X-ray?' He yelled back, 'Great! Great! I get to go to the can!' Several elderly ladies were shocked." She smiled.

That was his first mild meeting with tubercular humor, and he tried to smile back. "Are you supposed to condition me to this sort of thing?" he asked.

"No," she said, "You have to condition yourself."

After a few days, he realized that he was enjoying himself in a passive sort of way. He found it a little hard to put down his book and lie quietly from two to four every afternoon, but he soon got used to it, and gradually, as the days slipped by, he began to feel rested and at home. His porch was an all-weather room with a radiator and large windows, but he soon found that to be really comfortable he must build a sort of den for himself in the corner. To his left he had a table, and on it he kept a radio phonograph within easy reach of his hand. On the other side he had pictures of his family, his books and magazines. Across the bed was a sliding table with the "temp. stick" and kleenex, and there was a wastebasket within throwing distance.

After a while he began thinking about Betty, and was pleased to find that he missed her. This was a good sign. It meant that when he got back to Plandome feeling well and strong, he could break down the barrier.

He did more reading than he had ever done since

college, and once in a while he would think of taking up a pencil and working a little, trying out a verse. . . something light, of course, but fun. . . . And maybe the New Yorker would buy it, and he would have proved something, a talent, the right to be at least a part-time artist. But this would come later, after his mind had worked over his life, refining his experience and letting him forget the routine of the office.

He was surprised how quickly he ceased worrying about the sales of the new Continental De Luxe Portable, with the automatic slide tabulator and Mystery Touch Margin Changer. He even felt a sort of guilty pleasure that there was nothing that he could do about it.

Yet looking at it from this distance, the office was a pretty nice place at that. The President, himself, had written him telling him not to worry, that his salary would continue, his friends would stand by him, and his job remain open. . . . And when he did go back, he thought, it would be different, somehow. They wouldn't work him so hard, and he would write and read on the side. . . .

After all, it's only an interlude, he had told himself a thousand times, a few months cut from my life like a slice of cake, or like one of those pie charts the ad men bring down from the agency. "This circle represents Gordon Talbot's business life, gentlemen. The fourteen per cent

represented by the black section here shows the time it took him to recover from tuberculosis. This leaves a valuable eighty-six per cent, gentlemen, a tremendous potential sales increase. . . ."

That was the way he had thought of it as the days slipped into weeks and the evenings seemed to come faster than mornings, while he waited for the time of the first check, the first X-ray. He knew the cure was doing him good. He felt rested, relaxed, and it was fun to be babied. Meantime, he did what he could to amuse himself with the drab-looking characters that wandered around the halls.

Like Cathy Bernstein, a patient who had lived in almost every cure cottage in town. She was large and lumpy. Across her nose she wore monstrous black glasses encrusted with innumerable rhinestones, and her voice, filled with gravel, croaked happy excerpts from the movie magazines.

Once, she arrived suddenly, a towel around her head. She slipped through the door without knocking, and closing it behind her with an air of deepest mystery, she padded across the porch to his chair. "Lookit, Gordon," she whispered hoarsely. "Excuse it please on account I'm being followed--and it ain't a man."

"Mrs. Berwick?" Mrs. Berwick owned the cottage, and considered herself a schoolmistress, an enemy watching the halls, waiting for a patient--preferably a woman--to break a

regulation.

"Yeah, she seen me with the mud on."

"Again?"

"Yeah, I got tired of my old face so I peeled it off. How do you like this one?"

"I think it's beautiful," Gordon said, examining the roughened sallow complexion. "I better call a movie producer friend of mine about you."

"Wait, you haven't seen it all! Geeze I'm beautiful when you get a gander at me all at once."

"Please, Cathy! Remember where you are."

"Relax, son! The City Commissioner says no--no strippin' except around the head. Get ready for the <u>big</u> surprise." She unwrapped the towel, exhibiting hair of a bright henna tint clinging wetly to her head and clutched in tortured knots by curlers. "There--Maureen O'Hara Scarlet!"

"It's beautiful, Cathy. It gives me a big yen."

"Nuts! But anyway it's different from last week, that's what counts. . . . Louise had a letter from her friend Elmer. He's comin' up to see her. Whaddaya think of that?"

"So that's it!" Gordon looked knowing. "After all that mud you're going to take Louise's Elmer away, huh?"

She looked at him solemnly, owlishly, through the fantastic glasses, and under her absurdity he saw for a

moment the loneliness.

"It's you!" she whispered in her sandpaper voice. "I'd have a chance, only for Miss Jennifer. Maybe could you let me just look at your back, the one that drives the girls crazy?"

This was one of those standing jokes that everyone used--squeezing the last smile from it. Miss Jennifer was the night nurse, a middle-aged, tub-like creature filled with curiosity that was equalled only by her feeling of self-importance. Her frustrations, which must have been many, Gordon thought, were discussed exhaustively by the lady patients, all of whom hated her thoroughly.

With his great advantage of bathroom privileges, Gordon was allowed to use the tub three times a week just before going to bed. Locking the door, he would soak himself deliciously, glad of even this slight change of pace from his porch. Then, one night, someone knocked.

"Yes?"

"Let me in, please," said the fussy voice of Miss Jennifer. "I'm supposed to wash your back."

"I can wash it all right, thanks."

"You're not supposed to."

"Why not? I've done it ever since I was five years old."

"It's too much strain across your chest. You mustn't

use your arms like that."

"O.K. I'll put the washcloth on the back of the tub, and push up and down with my feet."

Miss Jennifer went away. But her campaign continued.

"You must let Miss Jennifer wash your back," Charlotte Monahan said the next morning. "You're not supposed to do it."

"Could I take my bath in the morning and let you do it?" he asked.

"No, it's Miss Jennifer's job."

But Gordon held out. Night after night she came, knocking, knocking at his bathroom door, and each time he enjoyed thinking up a new and more fantastic reason why she could not come in. And each morning the patients waited eagerly for news of the latest skirmish. Then Miss Berwick ordered him to let her in, and he got angry. At last, Dr. Burroughs, serious, quiet, a glint of humor in his eyes, suggested that Gordon, in the interests of his tuberculosis, suppress his Puritan scruples. And that night she washed him--badly, roughly, ordering him to cover himself with an extra washcloth.

But the lost battle was gleeful gossip, and looking back on it, Gordon felt that it was all very childish, even if it did cheer the patients a little during a rainy week.

Although they were not a stimulating group, at first

they helped to pass the time, and there was only one really gruesome fly in the ointment, a man named Miller.

He was a little ape of a man, flat-nosed, scrawny and over-eager. He had only two subjects of conversation--filthy jokes and tuberculosis. Like Cathy, he was allowed the privilege of roaming the halls, and as Gordon was the only other man in the house, he wanted very much to form a bond of intimacy.

"How's your sputum?" he would ask, charging in the door and lowering himself comfortably into a chair.

"Fine thanks."

"Boy! Mine's positive as all hell. . . . Say, they sure did a job on Mrs. Windrow. Took three ribs on the right and established a bilateral beachhead on the left."

"You don't say."

"Yeah. How are you feeling?"

"Peachy."

"Well, the first six years are the hardest, I always say. And what you need is a good long rest."

"Uhhuh."

"When I came up here first, they gave everybody gas. Don't do it as much now. After I had it a while I got fluid. Don't ever get fluid. . . ."

And so it went, the descriptions getting more and more vivid until Gordon could feel in his imagination every-

thing that Miller described. After a while even his sleep was troubled, and he hinted as broadly as he could to Miller that he was unwelcome. But Miller enjoyed his disease with a single-mindedness that to Gordon was incredible. For some reason, the man had to talk about it to someone, anyone, at every opportunity.

At last Gordon took a candy box, cut a slit across the top of it, and printed "Miller" across the side. The next time the man came in he put it on the bed table. "That's for you, Miller," he said.

"Yeah? Whaddaya know! What's the gag?"

"After an X-ray or a sputum test, I'm glad to hear about it, Miller. But I can't stand a continued diagnosis, a repetitive, exhaustive analysis of the course taken by every tubercle that winds through your body. I'm sorry, but I find it repulsive. So from now on, any mention of tb in this room will cost you one buck, United States currency."

"What the hell? What are you talking about? I don't get it."

The hell with being subtle! Gordon reared up on his pillows. "I'm saying that if you talk any more tb in this room, I'm going to rise up from this bed of pain and bust you one."

"Oh. . . Yeah. . . I see." Miller looked as though he had been slapped across the face. "Yeah, I get what you

mean. I guess I do think about it a lot."

For the first time Miller seemed to realize dimly that someone might dislike him. Here was tb, a bond, something, the only thing he had in common with anybody, and Gordon had repudiated it. For a minute, as Miller left the room, Gordon was almost sorry for him.

But he soon came back, and, as Gordon told Charlotte Monahan, he simply moved down from the lungs to the bowels, and his other aptitude, the dirty joke that isn't funny, took over completely. In a week or two, Gordon was glad to hear about Miller's symptoms in order to avoid his even more vivid scatological analysis.

Once in a while there was a pleasant interlude when Charlotte, tired and a bit awry, would sink into his chair for a moment, and ask him about his reading and what he was thinking about. And he would let himself go, watching the sympathy in the wide mouth. He realized that she knew a great deal more about him than he knew about her. But somehow, with her, it didn't matter.

Although he knew he was not in love with her, he thought about her and sometimes even dreamed of her because, he realized, she was the only attractive woman he ever saw, and lying in bed day after day a man was liable to sexual fantasy. He thought about Betty in the same way, and the only thing to do was to keep such day dreams at a minimum.

He never made a pass at her; not that it wouldn't be a pleasure, but, well, no doubt it was the sort of thing that Miller tried at every opportunity. Somehow she wasn't the kind you could be casual with, and then, too, she was a thoroughly professional nurse, and wore the professional reserve that went on with her uniform. Gordon wondered about her life away from the cure cottage. She rarely spoke of it, but it was a different, normal life, he thought, far from the everlasting wax-covered tubercle.

As the weeks went by and Gordon gained weight, Dr. Burroughs was pleased. "It's a good sign, Gordon," he said. "We'll have to have another picture pretty soon." Gordon considered his soft white body and growing stomach repulsive. But after all it's only proof I'm getting well, he thought. The interlude is passing.

They took the X-ray in bed with portable equipment to save his going down to the radiological building. "Some improvement," the Doctor said. "Less infiltration, but the cavity is still there. It's smaller though. We're doing the right thing. Just keep up the good work."

After all that rest and gaining that weight, it was like a kick in the groin. It didn't matter that people thought he had made progress, that Cathy Bernstein said, "Geeze, wonderful! Superman it makes you!" and Mrs. Berwick said, "Congratulations!" as though he had just been delivered

of an eight pound baby boy. It didn't help when his breakfast tray was piled high in triumph by Mrs. Toast.

Only Charlotte Monahan was any real help to him. "It's going to take longer than you thought it would," she said. "It always does. When the doctors send you up here they lie like hell. They have to or you wouldn't come."

But though the days continued to slip by, and he soon relaxed into the routine again, he knew that he was changing. Before, he had felt like a visitor, an outsider who could watch the chronics in the house with a slight, almost unconscious feeling of superiority. They were doomed to stay here for years, perhaps forever; while he was only a minimal case just in for a short rest. But now he began to think that he might be one of them, and his mind refused to accept it. He found that he was withdrawing into himself, and that by keeping his door closed he could say, in effect, that he did not want visitors. When he did see them, he made it a point to be pleasant and to make wise cracks whenever possible. But he found that, as time went on, he was happier by himself, and with the exception of Charlotte Monahan, he avoided his neighbors as much as possible.

Sometimes, late at night he woke up sweating with fear. Sweat was a "symptom," too, and this made him sit up in bed, throw back the covers, and sitting there shivering, he would fight back the spasm of terror until it subsided.

He could see himself under the surgeon's knife or with a tube attached to himself and a pump. . . .

Gordon realized now that it was the sound from the next room that had reminded him of the pump. It pounded the way his own heart was thumping. The self-sounding of his body was going on in spite of his efforts to stop it. He didn't feel well. He hadn't for some time. Of course, it might just be the waiting, just his imagination working because he had not heard about the X-ray. But then again it might not.

Shakily, guiltily, he decided to test himself, and he was reaching for the thermometer when there was a knock on the door and Charlotte Monahan entered. Quickly he pulled his hand under the covers.

"Dr. Burroughs' secretary just called, and you have an appointment for five," she said.

"You mean I go down there?" He sat up in bed.

"That's right."

He wanted to ask her what it meant. Was it a good sign or a bad one? It might be good; after all, they were really letting him up for the first time. Or again, it might mean a conference with the surgeon, a more complete examination.

"Don't worry," she said, with what seemed to him a false cheery note. "It doesn't mean anything."

Gordon looked at her directly, feeling childish because in spite of his dead pan she knew, of course. He couldn't fool her. But he mustn't ask. He mustn't. . . .

"As a matter of fact," she went on, "I think that--"

"Your cap's on crooked again," he snapped.

"Oh. . . Er. . . Thanks!" She turned quickly and left the room.

He looked at the clock. Ten of twelve. A long wait. But he had held his own, and in five hours he would know--for sure. He forced himself to think of the last time. Two weeks before the second X-ray he had been feeling just about the way he felt right now, except that he didn't quite realize what the matter was. He found that his reading had gone stale; it was hard to concentrate, and it was impossible to work on the wire jewelry. At last he wondered if writing something might not help him--give him a feeling of accomplishment. Why not try a bit of verse, something for himself, of course, something he would show no one at all. Just practice. . . .

It was late afternoon, and a darkness without sunset was falling under gray cloud.

He picked up a pad and pencil and was surprised to find his hand shaking. He made doodles, trying to steady it. He remembered someone saying that you could start the mind going by writing any old thing. . . . "Now is the time for

all good patients to come to. . . " Nothing happened. . . . His mind was a blank. . . . There was nothing to say. . . . Nothing to think. . . Not a god damned thing. And suddenly his world contracted. It shrank and wrinkled until it was only a small brown porch with a litter of dead books and magazines, and a temperature stick and a chart board, and one bed, and one pale, flabby bag of human flesh lying there shaking. . . .

An hour later when Charlotte Monahan came into the room and turned on the light she found him with sweat on his face, gripping the cold steel of the bed-frame with both hands.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I can't do it," he said. "I can't write. I can't think. My god damn mind's gone." He was so angry he wanted to get out of bed and tear the porch down board by board and let in some world. Only he couldn't do it. He didn't have any strength. . . . God damn it to hell. . .

It was very un-nurse-like, the feeling of her slender fingers as she took his hand from the cold steel of the bed-frame. She held it a moment.

"It happens to everybody," she said quickly. "Everybody who needs to think and to feel life. . . . It passes, Gordon, it doesn't mean anything."

Then the hand was gone and the nurse was back, and

she was tidying up, taking away the pad and pencil, clearing the sliding table in preparation for his supper. The starch of her uniform rustled professionally. . . . He stared out the window at nothing.

As the time for the X-ray approached, Gordon began running a ninety-nine. He was afraid to take his temperature--and he was afraid not to. He couldn't leave it in his mouth very long without glancing at it, watching it creep up toward the red line. . . .

One night Charlotte Monahan caught him at it.

"Leave it in," she said. "If you look at it all the time we won't get a correct reading."

He pulled the thing from his mouth. "But <u>why</u> have I got a temperature?" he asked, disliking the querulous tone of his own voice.

"Very likely it's because you're nervous about it," she said.

"Well, I can't help being nervous." He wished he could shut up, but some force over which he had no control made him go on talking. "Hell, you'd be nervous, too. It's getting worse all the time."

"All right," she answered patiently. "Suppose I take your temperature and write it on the chart. Then you'll never know."

"I'd go crazy. I have to see it." For some reason

he remembered how sympathetic everyone had been in Plandome, how a girl he hardly knew, the wife of a guy he played cards with on the train, had cried. How they had brought him going-away presents-- "Gee, you nurses are a bunch of cold fish," he said. "You rush in and out of our rooms, healthy as all hell. You've got a job. You've got another life outside with a pattern to it, a meaning, a future. But you're a bunch of sadistic angels with chart boards. . . ."

"What do you expect?" she asked, staring down at him. "A mother?"

He was getting angry now. He wanted to hurt her. "No--just a woman," he said, "a plain, everyday normal woman with normal sympathy for a disease you don't understand."

"You don't think I understand tuberculosis?"

"I know damn well you don't. You couldn't--not with that attitude. You'd have to be human."

"You sound very much like Mr. Miller." She still looked at him, as though trying to make up her mind about something.

"So what?" He was really sore now. She'd hit him where it hurt. "You know what Miller thinks of you, don't you?"

"I can guess. And we'll skip it, if you don't mind."

"Well, he's right. Now why don't you get out of here." He turned away from her toward the window, so angry

at himself that he was choking.

But she didn't leave, and when he turned back to look at her she was sitting in his chair, still watching him. Waiting for the spasm to pass, he thought bitterly.

"I think I better tell you something," she said, levelly. "Just for the record. . . . Five years ago my husband died of tb in the state san. I had it, too. I was down two years. I had three ribs out." She paused, hunting words. "Another thing. . . Dozens of people are waiting for X-rays. They're lying around this very minute feeling just as nervous as you are. But you're the only one who's acting like a baby. I've known nine-year-old kids with worse tb than yours--but never in my life have I seen anyone lose his nerve as fast as you have." She shook an angry finger at him. "Now my suggestion to you is that you start showing some good old-fashioned guts!"

Then, suddenly, as though she realized that she shouldn't have said it, she rose hurriedly, and making the characteristic grab at her cap, she left the room.

. . . . . .

After the X-ray, which showed little change, they had whisked him to the hospital early one morning and crushed the phrenic nerve in his shoulder at the base of the neck. It was painful, but it shoved the diaphragm up under his bad lung. It encouraged him to feel that they were actually

doing something about him--yet, in the back of his mind the realization grew that he was really no better. He was not winning the battle. "The good long rest" was only long.

After his beating from Charlotte Monahan, he withdrew more than ever into himself, and though he made an effort to be nice to everyone, there was no fun in it, and the pleasant interludes when he and Charlotte talked about things became forced and useless.

Now the cycle was complete again, and the heat was really on--until five o'clock tonight. Somehow he got through lunch and rest hour. Charlotte said nothing when she took his pulse and felt it pounding. And as the light faded from the windows, he was still propped up on his pillows thinking. But he snapped on the lamp and opened a book so that if Charlotte came in, he would not be lying in the dark.

After all, there was a new element of hope, he told himself. The phrenic operation might have helped; he might be on his way up again. . . .

"It gives me great pleasure to present you with your pants," said Charlotte at four-thirty.

"Spoken like a madam," he said, swinging his legs to the floor.

"Don't be vulgar, or I won't help you put them on."

"I don't need help."

"Don't bother with underwear. Put 'em over your pajamas," she said.

He found his stomach so fat that the pants would only zip up half-way. The shirt collar was so tight that he could not button it.

"I must have stolen these clothes somewhere," he panted as he straightened up from tying his shoes. "They sure don't belong to me."

Squaring his shoulders, he looked into the mirror and examined the melon-like bulge in his pants, and the neck swelling out over his shirt-collar. At least there was no bathrobe, no droopy pajama pants, and he once again resembled a man. Peering into the glass he was astonished to see how much taller he was than Charlotte, who was looking up at him, a little smile on her broad mouth.

"Now if I just had some muscles to propel all this mush around. . . ." he grumbled.

"You have. But they're mighty soft," she said. "You must take it easy and try not to get winded. There's no hurry."

She helped him into his overcoat which weighed him down until he could feel his shoulders sag. "Don't worry," he said. "In this coat I can hardly stagger. Feel as though I had nothing to eat but mashed potatoes for six months."

"Fine!" She held his arm as he started down the stairs. "If you felt too good you might start looking for

trouble."

He was almost at the bottom when they met Mrs. Toast. She stopped in front of them, looking up at him until her wig seemed to slip backward on her head. "I know you're going to have good news, Mr. Talbot," she said urgently. "I just know it!"

Talbot was afraid she was going to cry, but she only sniffed twice, and as she passed him she pressed his arm.

"Love like that," whispered Charlotte, "must be a terrible responsibility for you."

"Right now I have all I can do to stand up," Gordon said.

Charlotte was opening the big double doors, when a hoarse whisper called from the landing, "Hey kid! Lay 'em in the aisles!" Looking up, he saw for the fraction of a second a bit of fantastic sculptured clay, a blob with only the eyes alive, peering from plaster sockets. Then it vanished, and he was in the open with Charlotte, headed for the taxi under the wooden porte-cochere.

The sudden change from his porch and the sterile-white bank outside his window to the vision of lights in the village below him, and the sleek taxi puffing quiet smoke rings, caught at his throat. He forgot his heavy coat, the weary feeling in his shoulders, the leaden galoshes pulling at his legs. All at once he knew that for a moment he was waking

up, coming alive.

"After the doctor's," he said, "I'll have a good dinner and a few quick ones at Jergin's tavern. Would you care to join me?"

"No!" She helped him down the steps. "You try that and you'll fold like a tent in a high wind. Be back here by six or I'll beat your brains out."

He hardly heard her, because he was busy with the fascinating matter of opening the taxi door, of getting into a great big beautiful master Buick with an engine that purred like a tiger, a rocket-powered, high-torque, scotch mist engine with a double hydraulic center-point over-sized beauty in every line of the upholstery. . . . A thing that could go anywhere in all the world, and drive him away, eating up the road until the last vestige of dark brown porch was lost to memory.

Gordon sank back in the warm darkness and sighed, and the driver, seeing that he was comfortable, gently put the car in gear as though his passenger might fall apart if he started off too swiftly. Gordon saw Charlotte lean forward from the porch, hugging her breasts in the cold. "Good luck," she whispered. He waved at her and smiled, and as the car pulled away, he noticed that she stayed there watching him, her face in shadow, her hair glowing under the single porch lamp and her skirt blowing stiffly in the icy

wind.

Why does she stand there in the cold? he wondered. Why does she wait? And he knew suddenly that this journey of his, this few frozen blocks to the Doctor's office, meant something to her, too--enough to make her stand and watch the Buick, its tires crunching in the snow, slide down the driveway. It was almost as though part of her were still with him, holding his arm, caring a damn. . . .

He kept his eyes on her until the car turned into the street and she became part of the great, rambling wooden castle, its porches hanging perilously from the walls wherever there was an inch of extra space. For a moment he saw the special, de luxe suite on the first floor front. The man in bed was sitting up for some reason and waving his arms, grabbing his hands and shaking them like a prize fighter acknowledging applause. It was another good-luck wish, a cheer from one of the most repulsive men in all creation--Mr. Miller.

As he looked, the building swung around showing other porches, lights, tremendously exciting planes, angles, colors, spinning away into a dead-dark sky, and Talbot watched the lights flashing signals, showing where the patients lay, thinking thoughts. . . fighting germs. . . .

After the months of stillness, the rhythm, the swift changes of pattern were an almost unbearable excitement, and

Gordon ground down the window to see past the filthy snow-banks tossed up by the plow. He drew in the smell of the snow and the acrid odor of burnt gasoline. He gloated over the dismal gray clapboard houses and the taverns with their blood-red neon signs. "Take it slow, please, driver," he said.

"First time out?" The taxi man had a pleasant voice, no Bronx who-do-you-think-you-are-Mac, in the tone.

"Yes, it's pretty exciting." A slash of snow crossed the widening street, blurring the lights and battering the weary tenements. He saw the people swerving from the sudden gust--the old ladies, kids and tired men, muffled up, hurrying someplace, cussing the climate, the god damned glorious, horrible winter that went on forever.

They passed the steamy window of a cut-rate grocery, and Talbot saw a dirty little child give the grocery man a coin and then cram something into his mouth.

"Pull up a second, will you driver?"

"Sure, we got lots of time." The car stopped, and Gordon watched, fascinated. The boy was chewing, looking at the candy under the counter, ruminating to himself like a young calf working on his cud. Maybe it would happen, if they could wait long enough. And sure enough, a pimple came from the boy's mouth, it grew horribly, fantastically, bulging out, ballooning into a great red thing, repulsive, nasty,

and delightful, then "blap" it burst, smearing the child's face with sticky bits of bubble gum.

"OK driver," Gordon said ecstatically. "You can go on now." The driver's shoulders shook, but Gordon didn't mind being laughed at much because that boy was Benny--almost.

"Want to drive through town just for the thrill?" the man asked.

"Is it so thrilling?" Talbot didn't want the driver to get too chummy, somehow.

"Frankly, it's a dump," the man said. "But I just thought. . . ."

The driver knew damn well what was happening to a patient out for the first time, because he had been one, Gordon thought. "OK," he said, trying to sound as though it didn't matter. "We might as well."

The thought of the X-ray came back then, and he realized he was putting it off, delaying the evil moment, but it was worth it, because something was happening to him, something he didn't understand, some kind of revision in his mind, his body, his emotions, a re-organization, a desire to give out with something.

It couldn't last, nothing as intense as this could go on for long, but it had to be enjoyed to the end, squeezed to the last drop. It was almost like the first stages of

a drunk when everything seemed possible, important--and worth loving.

He felt a vague desire to keep the taxi man a little off the track by hiding his emotions. "What's going on in this town?" he asked, his eyes on a beautiful scarlet neon sign reading "Jack's Place." Through the window he had a glimpse of the boys lined up at the bar, hunched over, hats on the backs of their heads, catching a quick one before going home, and there was a second's glimpse of a multi-colored juke box of exquisite beauty. . . .

"Nothing much. Bets are starting on when the ice will go out of the lake."

"That so. Does it go out all at once or gradually?" He saw a big truck splash through the half-frozen mush, throwing mud and slush at the people on the sidewalk. Where did it come from? Where was it going through the dim night? What a break for a man to drive on across the continent, flirting with waitresses, ordering greasy hamburgers on rye and hot java in Memphis or Jacksonville--staying up all night, and, above all, never having to go to bed until he reached the end of the run.

"It's very strange," the driver was saying. "It's a very beautiful lake when the ice is gone. Sometimes it just melts away all at once. And sometimes when the wind blows, it breaks up, smashing against the shore."

To break up, melt, smash, live. . . Gordon thought . . . .

"Here's Main Street," said the driver. "The new lights are awful. Every time one patient sees another under 'em, they scream and run to the doctor."

They were brilliant lamps on high poles and cast a jaundiced, blue light over the tight-packed buildings, making them as flat and thin and false-fronted as a movie set, but they were exciting to Gordon. They were part of a strange world, appearing suddenly, for no good reason, a dream conjured up by this taxi driver, this nemesis who was driving him through fantasy to some unknown fate. It was as though the driver already knew about the X-ray, and was showing him something first, something to take along with him.

They pulled up at a stop light, and Gordon watched a girl, muffled and hurried, saw her face under the glare. She was part of the dream with cheeks of a bloodless green, and her lips a slash of purple. He wanted to call to her, to get close to her, and see for himself those looks of death. Could he bring her to life under candlelight? Would the lips turn red and the cheeks have color in a dim room over a cool martini? Was she as lonely as she looked, battling the wind all by herself under the deathlike glare?

The traffic signal turned green, and they moved on, passing the store windows glowing warmly in spite of the

street lamps. He saw an evening dress, and he suddenly wanted to buy things. He could give that dress to Charlotte, a dress that had no starch, no stiffness, that flowed warmly from the body. . . . And what could he buy for Cathy? In that "Cut-rate Drugs" would there be a perfume strong enough, an aphrodasiac that would land Elmer or somebody who could see behind the mud, the hair wash, the Bronx accent. . . . And what in heaven's name could he get for Miller, tomorrow when the stores were open and he could telephone an order? A filthy book? A dirty picture? "Do you know Miller at our house?" he asked the driver.

"Sure." The driver nodded his head emphatically. "Once in a while I take him down to the. . . well, you know."

"Yeah," Talbot said. "But do you know anything <u>else</u> I could buy him?"

"Well," the driver seemed to be thinking. "He always stops and eats a lot of ice cream on the way back."

Ice cream it was! At least it would salve his conscience over the business of the box with the slit in it. . . .

He was watching still, as they left the gaudy lights of the main drag and entered a dark street under bare-limbed trees where the frozen cars were stuck to the curb, and the houses were bigger with lawns of snow. . . . They slowed. . . . they stopped, and the driver opened the door.

Talbot pulled himself out, and sagging under the heavy coat, he straightened his back to the cold wind.

The driver peered through the window. "Just call me when you're ready," he said. "And. . . well, I hope you have a good X-ray."

"Thanks," Talbot said. "And thanks for the extra ride."

He watched the cab turn, saw the lights swing around casting complicated, intertwining shadows on the front of the doctor's house, and he followed the car's passage down the snow-lane, enjoying the sheer perspective of it, as it dwindled, moving off, growing smaller, two red spots fading. . . .

Then he turned and saw the little bronze sign.

The doctor was waiting, the report from the radiologist was on his desk--but cockeyed things had happened to the patient that no X-ray would show. Probably it was only the sudden stimulation. After the brown porch and the snow bank and the cure cottage for almost five months, the change of scene woke up the senses and drove them crazy until they sent frantic signals to the brain. . . . Yet there was something more to it than that. . . .

The wind was chilling him, and Gordon had to give it up. With his clumsy open galoshes clinking in the frosty air, he plodded up the walk to the office. But as his fingers touched the cold metal of the door-handle, he paused again,

thinking of Charlotte standing there in the cold watching him. And that driver--what was it he said? "Sometimes it melts away all at once. Sometimes it breaks up, smashing against the shore. . . ."

Perhaps if you stay here long enough, he thought, you look at people the way you look at lakes. He opened the door slowly. And maybe if you watch them long enough, you can guess when the ice will go out.

TURNING POINT

"Memo to Les Paul, Chicago Office," he dictated into the recorder. "Subject: Continental Steel Radio-TV audition The American Way. Dear Les: Leave here on the Century, Tuesday, with turn-over presentation, radio and TV kinescope audition for meeting with client. Paragraph. As I am to make opening remarks, I attach some suggested notes which we can discuss when I get there. Sincerely, W. J. . . . New page, title, Notes for an Introduction to The American Way audition. Paragraph. The time has come, it seems to us, for a great industrial firm like Continental Steel to remind the people of the finest tradition we have, the chance every American has to fight his way to the top, dash, the tradition of Lincoln, Andy Jackson, Thomas Edison and,yes, the great tradition of Horatio Alger. . . ."

He paused. It was corn, he thought, but golden corn. With the right slant on it, a twist, a switch of some kind, it was worth three million dollars. Old Whetherby, the President of Continental Steel, was proudly self-made, and The American Way, if it wasn't made too obvious, would hit him right in the gizzard. And when he liked an idea, his whim was as good as a contract.

A spring wind--a night wind with a touch of sea in it--blew in softly from Madison Avenue, and W. J. Brilling,

gazing at the windows of the hotel across the street, listened to the hiss of tires as the traffic lights changed, the ripping, tearing sounds from the busses leaving the corner and, underneath the surface, the grumbling of the city . . . . After all, he thought, he was self-made, too. He was all over this town with radio shows, TV programs and advertisements that went into hundreds of thousands of homes. This very minute he had a sign winking over Broadway, a twenty-four sheet on Times Square--and his name on the door outside this room carried the magic symbol "Vice. Pres." He ought to be able to talk Whetherby's language, make some opening statement that would draw them together, start the audition off with a warmth and understanding between them. . . .

But he would have to suppress this anxious feeling. After all, no clambake goes on forever, and after five years it was natural for another agency to start sniping at Continental Steel. When underground reports came in that Whetherby was listening to auditions, he should not have been surprised, or scared, or felt like some old beat-up firehorse answering his last three-alarm.

Of course the Plan Board got excited and held a series of meetings. The top creative men rushed in with dozens of half-baked ideas for saving the account, and other account executives pretended to be worried--and watched him with speculation in their eyes, wondering if he was slipping, and

thinking how much better they could handle Continental Steel. But it was just the same old rat race, and he, a wise old campaigner, had kept quiet, stayed in the office until late at night, and let his mind play over the whole problem until he had hit on this idea that topped them all--The American Way. It was a natural because it had what Whetherby liked. It was "down to earth"; it "hit Americans in the guts"; in fact it said exactly what Whetherby already believed. So it was all but in the bag; there was nothing to worry about--if only he could get the right start for the audition, the right approach, a few words worth three million dollars.

His train of thought was interrupted by the hotel window across the street. Someone had turned on the light and, automatically out of old habit, he had begun to look for a peep show, a free stripping act. Wonderful things had been seen by executives looking at the windows over there. Members of the Board stopped meetings and even telephoned to each other to give fantastic play-by-play descriptions--"She's taking off her brassiere. . . Here's the wind-up. . . The pitch! . . . It's a two-bagger!" Once years ago Jack Werner had signalled a girl across from him, telephoned her, and made a pretty hot date out of it. And once on a hot summer night he had seen a girl sitting in the window, and right next door to her was a man with his chin in his hand and his elbows on the sill. They both seemed lonely, and

they sat there all evening, only a few inches apart, with only the wall between them, completely unaware. If either one had leaned forward an inch or two they might have seen each other, and might have smiled and decided they didn't have to be lonesome any more.

There was a woman in the room all right. He could see a pink slip pass the window. W. J. shifted uneasily in his chair. He was annoyed with her for interrupting his train of thought just when he was beginning to get somewhere. He rose wearily and paced the thick carpet until at last he realized that he had stopped in front of the window and was standing there, stroking his bald spot.

The hell with it! He had work to do; maybe a drink of water would help. Passing his desk, he glanced for a moment at a book lying on it. The bright dust jacket announced it as "West of Hong Kong, by Hap Woodruff," and a card beside it read, "With the compliments of the author."

W. J. opened the door and crossed the main aisle to the water tank. As he pulled the flat little cup from its container and held it under the spigot, letting the warm water belly it out, he wondered how many times he had done this late at night in the last twenty-odd years. The tremendous block-deep room, running from Madison to Vanderbilt Avenue, smelled just as it did years ago--of stale air and dust and old breath. Somewhere a typewriter plunked thought-

fully, as a copywriter worked to meet a deadline, and it all seemed so old and familiar--even the taste of the brackish, stale water. . . .

He threw the cup into a wastebasket, and leaning on a partition, he gazed down the room past the glass cells, the goldfish bowls, where young writers sweated their brains, past the open prairies of the Forwarding and Production Departments, to the rear where the kids on the Checking Desk hunted through papers for tearsheets of ads already run, and he thought of the other floors with Radio and TV, Accounting, Art, Media, Library Research, and the experimental kitchen, and he tried to feel again the tremendous energy, the drive that made a few thoughts, a few ideas, a few simple twists of phrase household words from coast to coast.

Here and there the solid green walls cut off the outside windows to isolate the executives like himself, and give them air, the quiet of thick carpets, a shiny secretary and thirty thousand bucks a year. . . And he remembered coming back from a West Indies vacation to find that one of the familiar partitions had disappeared. George Gage had lost the battle of Fresh Foods, Inc. The enemy had blown their advertising trumpets at George's Jericho, and George's wall came tumbling down.

W. J. wiped his face with a handkerchief, drank another glass of water, lit a cigarette and tried the old

trick he used for getting himself in the mood--the device of reenactment. He saw himself get up in the Board Room of Continental Steel and stand in front of Whetherby and his executives. He would be wearing his dark pinstripe with the maroon tie, and he'd look into that bunch of cold show-me faces and give them that old, tired, friendly smile, as though they were all part of the same family. . . And he'd open with a little anecdote. (Not a joke. Whetherby never got the point soon enough, and it irritated him.) Just a little personal story, apropos, amusing, obvious. . . . Perhaps retelling with a twist something Whetherby already knew such as. . . such as. . . .

Let's see! After a couple of drinks Whetherby liked to talk about himself, how he got his start as a crane operator in an open hearth. The turning point! That's what he called it! Whetherby said there was always a turning point--and if you were bright enough to realize it, quick enough to take advantage, you were in, you hit the top!

Now I'll stand up there and start quoting him, W. J. thought, and then I'll tell a little story about my turning point. I'll keep it modest, funny, make myself a little bit ridiculous in comparison with him. But it will form that bond between us. It'll get Whetherby on my side. . . .

W. J. leaned on the partition, looking across the copy-writer's cells gleaming in the dimness like the cross-

section of a giant honeycomb, and at first he found it soothing to remember his success story, to think of a night twenty years ago when he had sat on the parcel counter back there by the freight elevators, waiting to take a letter or a late memo to Grand Central. There he was, a small-town boy from Virginia, with no pull, no drag, a graduate of a small religious-minded college, dropped into the largest advertising agency in the biggest city in the world. No one could say he hadn't started from the bottom!

He could see himself mailing the letter, eating a fifty-cent vegetable dinner at Childs, and then, not daring to spend thirty precious cents at a movie, returning to the room on West Eighty-first Street. He remembered how reluctantly he walked up the dirty brown-stone steps, up the hall filled with the inevitable cabbage smell, and into the darkened room. He pulled the string to the single bulb in the ceiling and lit up the brown walls. He saw the iron bedstead with the four brass balls at the corners, dented, crooked and loose to the touch, and the gas plate with the piece of dirty rubber pipe that ran into the wall, and above it the picture in the varnished frame. In a gondola moving gently down stream reclined a man and woman, and the woman's hand trailed languidly in the water. Astern stood the gondolier, a soggy, fat-limbed, unhealthy-looking cupid, and the title of the picture was "Love's Dream."

W. J. remembered that he had renamed it, realistically enough, "Rocks Ahead," and yet, looking back on it, it was a good portrait of his mind at the time. He was engaged to a cute little Sweet Briar girl, and he had left her among the peach blossoms to come north and cut his way to victory.

He had done it, too! won the maiden and put her in the gondola, and there she had stayed, growing fat and dull, absorbing his salary and his energy. A fretful, suburban woman now, she thought about nothing but servants, and bridge and stale week-end parties like the one she had planned for tomorrow. He would have to drink a lot to keep up, he thought, and he had better finish this job in time to catch the two-fifty-three local if he wanted a chance to sleep.

The plunking of the distant typewriter had stopped; the room was darker than ever, but up front he could hear the cleaning women, and they warned him that it was already late. A race apart, they never arrived until after midnight, when appearing from the shadows like gray moths, they flitted down the aisles, speaking a soft Slavic tongue that no one else could understand. He often wondered what they talked about as they swept and mopped, old women in gray rags, living a life of their own as they dusted and swept away the discarded ideas of the day before. And where did they go when dawn came? Into the cracks and the dust bins of the

steaming city, perhaps, for no one saw such people by the light of day. . . .

Back to the turning point! Maybe it was the day Hap Woodruff, his college room-mate, had slammed into his room at six in the morning, up from Virginia to seek his fortune.

"What the hell are you doing in this dump, Bill?" he asked. "Have you finished your novel yet?"

They had planned it all at college--to live in New York, "have experiences," sample adventure, examine life, and hold jobs long enough to make money by writing. Hap looked like a chunky half-back. He had the drive of a Marine sergeant, but his mind, he felt sure, was that of the poet, the thinker, the observer of bitter-sweet experience.

Hap uncovered another college friend, Mike Stanley, and moved them all to a fifth floor walk-up on West Eleventh Street. In less than a week he had found a job writing insurance copy, and by the following Saturday they were ready for a taste of Greenwich Village.

As W. J. remembered it, the first "adventure" was only The Pepper Pot, a tourist trap where for a small sum you could pick up out-of-town school teachers, who were also looking for experience. Then, later, they discovered the Lesbian cellar south of Washington Square, where the hostess, a "collar and tie job" as she called herself, would explain

to them the life of the extra sexes.

Hap and W. J. felt superior to such people but they enjoyed their own open-mindedness. They knew that as authors they must chronicle human nature in all its strangeness, and they felt sure that by talking to "fairies" and bums, by simply observing them, they would gradually learn to "understand life."

At last they discovered a speakeasy called "Julius's." Here they felt that they had touched the edges of genuine Bohemia; for here came the redhead with the great dane who stood up to the bar and ate the free lunch, the girl who, it was rumored, was the prototype for the heroine--what was her name, Brett--in Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises. Here you could drink etherised beer for a quarter a glass, and talk with queers about the prose style of James Branch Cabell, or listen to the police court yarns of over-age legmen from The New York World.

W. J. thought of a spring night--soft, with the wind from the ocean the way it was tonight--when he and Hap had walked down Greenwich Avenue sporting--of all things--Malacca canes. With no money and only the canes to lend them prestige, they stopped before a sign reading "Free Show, One Flight Down, Sponsored by the Communist Party."

"My god, Bolshiviki!" Hap said, standing in the light of the doorway, twirling his cane.

"I'll bet they all wear beards," W. J. said, "and carry bombs under their coats."

"And talk like mad in Russian."

"Should we give it a whirl?"

"Why not?" Hap said. "They can't knife us for our money. And it's Experience!"

It was a big cellar cut in two with a curtain, so that half of it served as a stage. The other half was filled with collapsible Sundayschool chairs and people.

"Come right in," invited a fat girl in a black dress. Nobody wore a beard; there seemed to be more girls than men, and the only distinguished-looking personage was an aged, gray-haired Negro. He had a paternal air, and looked like some minor prophet surrounded by disciples. W. J. remembered sitting next to the fat girl as the lights went out, and feeling the nearness of her, the heat of her body.

The play seemed very strange to him. There was some dialogue between two men wearing miner's hats with lamps on them. They were waiting for the owners to go into the mine. At last when it seemed that the owners were well below ground, a third character rushed in to say that they had turned on the water. Hurrah! They were flooding the mine. The owners were drowned. The great climax came when all the miners, cheering and shouting, paraded around the stage singing a Communist song.

It was very puzzling, and when the lights came on again, he asked the girl, "What the hell was all that about? How could you work the mine after drowning everybody?"

She looked at him sympathetically, and he saw that she was attracted to him. "Haven't you ever heard of the class struggle?" she asked.

"No, what is it?" (So help me, thought W. J., four years of college and he had no idea what she meant!)

Hap wasn't interested in the class struggle, either, but he liked a thin, tense-looking girl he had picked up, and now, following the old Negro apostle, they walked through the spring air to a restaurant on East Fourteenth Street where the tables were set about a bare room, and the walls were plastered with paintings of miners, working men, factory chimneys, hammer-and-sickle emblems and other communist symbols, splashed on in raw primitive colors.

They sat around drinking dago red, and they listened to the old Negro who told them, in a deep melancholy voice, of lynchings and beatings of the Klu Klux Klan, and the cruel robbery of the tenant farmers.

W. J. thought vaguely that there must be another side to the story, and after a while when the fat girl came over and sat on his lap, he knew that there should be some kind of class struggle within him. Certainly the Negro was different from what a colored man should be, and the girl on

his lap was definitely not from Sweet Briar. But as he went on drinking, he decided that nothing mattered in this strange new country--for he was living in a dream . . . .

It was very late when they left, and he was quite drunk. He remembered walking down dark streets with his arm around the girl, feeling at last he was part of the great city, a Bohemian, a radical maybe, and on the verge of some exotic experience. Here in the depths of the Village he was changing, leading a new life. . . .

"Come on upstairs. The chairs are very comfortable," the girl said in her soft Italian voice, and he remembered how his hands played down her body. . . .

"All right." His voice was gruff; he was embarrassed.

But she soon cured him of that.

It was an "experience" all right. For the next ten days he had been scared stiff, afraid that he had caught a dose, and for a while, Hap, too, was frightened. W. J. remembered how dirty he had felt, how his conscience had plagued him as he thought of the cleanness of Helen. She would never understand how he could sleep with a fat, rather dirty Italian girl--even while he was "engaged". And Helen was so much lovelier. . . .

Leaning on the glass partition, W. J. wondered if that had been a turning point, the week of fear and remorse.

Or had it been when at last the agency had raised him

to forty a week and given him a chance to write trade paper copy? He had found it so easy that he had energy left to write for himself during the evenings. Mike, the other roommate, was a night district man for the old City News Service; they had the apartment to themselves, and while Hap pounded away madly at what he hoped were penetrating psychological studies, W. J. dreamed in front of the big bedroom window and gazed out over the yards and tenements, the water tanks and chimneys, watching the moon shine on them and listening to the throbbing loneliness of the ship whistles in the harbor. Now and then, pulling himself back to earth, he typed out some of the things he had seen while roaming the city.

Other nights he would go out by himself. After a day of respectability, of going to lunch with other budding executives, of talking campaigns and copy themes, he would walk into the depths of the Village, and prowl around Minetta Lane, or stand in a sawdusty speakeasy and chew the rag with some strange woman with bangs across her forehead, and hear of the merits of e. e. cummings. It was a fine double life--while it lasted.

Then one day he received a hundred and fifty dollars from <u>The New Yorker</u> for a short-short story.

Hap, his square face showing envy at every pore said, "Gee, I wish I could write that light stuff. . . . Bill, you're on your way, by god. . . But. . . But. . . I'll catch

you. You know what I'm going to do, Bill? Dad sent me a hundred dollars and I'm going to quit work."

"On a hundred dollars?"

"Yep. I'll write all the time. I'll free-lance. And I'll sell something, damn it, if it kills me!"

Hap quit his job and wrote all day; his money dwindled and he borrowed from W. J., and still the rejection slips came in. He even tried cowboy stories for the pulps, and W. J. remembered poor Hap's expression as he read a note from the editor of Cowboy Romances: "Please, dear god! No more cattle rustlers!"

Perhaps, W. J. thought, the turning point came when the agency had given him a chance at a major campaign for Federal Electric and he had found suddenly that he was a born copywriter, that it rolled out of him. For a while he even neglected the Village, forgot Julius's, the adventures and "experiences," and even his own writing. It was too good a chance to make money, and he became so absorbed in his new ability that he worked late into the night. . . . Hell, he was good. Why not make a killing?

What would have happened if he had kept on with his free-lance work? Of all the people he met in the Village, including Hap, wasn't he, W. J., the one who might have gone the farthest and developed into a real writer? Why hadn't he stuck it out?

For one thing, W. J. remembered, life in the apartment was changing. Mike, the other room-mate, went on the day shift, and he and Hap started hanging around together and drinking. And Hap was entering a new phase. Gradually, as the rejection slips piled up, he turned himself from the young Adventurer into The-Writer-Who-Isn't-Understood. If he couldn't sell anything, he could write poetry for the few, live life to the dregs and wear a beret. He would burn with a hard and gem-like flame, and finally, after he was dead, people would discover his work.

Sometimes, coming home late at night, W. J. would find the apartment a shambles, and once, dead beat from work, he couldn't get into the bathroom because some girl was in there on a crying jag. W. J. remembered thinking he would have to take Hap in hand after the new campaign at the office was finished.

But just then came what may have been the turning point. He had been sitting in his cubicle roughing out a layout to show the art department when a secretary phoned that Chickering wanted him immediately. Chickering was a vice-president, a board member, a big shot. W. J. had felt his heart pump. He knew it meant something important, for Chickering could make or break a man at the flip of a memorandum. . . .

"I've been watching you," Chickering said, a big red-

faced man and a leader of the big-pore, body odor school of advertising.

"You've got the stuff, Brilling. How would you like a real job? Are you willing to give all you've got? Sweat it out? Get ulcers? Come in gray-faced in the morning?"

"Why, yes. I think so, sir."

"Willing to move to Chicago for a year or two?"

"Why. . . Maybe. . . I'd want to think it over."

"Six thousand to start, working on Sander's Soaps. They're tough boys, you know. Beat the bejesus out of you."

"Why I. . . ."

"Think it over. I've got to know by tomorrow noon."

He had finished the layout, and after eating a quick hamburger, he had walked into Central Park to think things over. It was a hot night, he remembered, and sitting on a bench he had gazed up at the Sherry Netherland and the Plaza outlined against the warm stars. Six thousand to start! It meant leaving New York for a while, the beauty of nights like this, the friendliness of Eighth Street, the lovely phonies in the Minetta Lane and Julius's. . . . And he wouldn't have time to write on his own--not on a job like that. . . .

Around him on the grass men and women lay wrapped up in each other, and faint murmurings came from them, reminding him of Helen. She'd been writing him and asking him

when--And she was too damned attractive to wait forever. . . .

He thought of the spring dances at college; how he had hired an old jitney and they had ridden into the Blue Ridge together, parking on the edge of a hill--and how for the first time she had been really passionate, and how incredible it seemed that a girl, so beautiful, so delicate, so unreal, could be so warm and honest about it. . . . It had taken a lot of control, but he had known it was better to wait. . . . And was there any greater "experience," after all, than marrying a girl like Helen, and having her with you all to yourself in the night?

And she'd make a good partner in Chicago. You could take a girl like that anywhere, have her meet the big executives, and they'd say, "My god, Bill, how did you get her to marry you?"

. . . . And he would have to leave this city, and the freedom of the Village, and crazy old Hap. . . . It meant "settling down," and having children, and maybe commuting, and the end of adventure. . . . And he would never be a free-lance, although of course after he got on top he could start writing again. . . Or could you write when you were gray-faced in the morning?

Helen would want him to take the job; so would his mother and father and friends. "Don't be a fool," they

would say. "It's your big chance. . . a chance to make good!"

It was late when he finally left the park and rode down town on the top of a Fifth Avenue bus, and when at last he reached the small-town friendliness of Eighth Street, it started to rain. But W. J., still pondering his problem, was in no hurry to go home. He turned up his coat collar and moved from doorway to doorway, watching the water glisten on the pavement, enjoying the lights of the little shops and bookstores that cut bright squares and angles on the sidewalk. He stood for a long time on a corner, and gazing up at an orange fog that swirled around the higher buildings, he wondered how he could ever leave this city. He was a part of it, a lover.

At last, feeling a sudden exhaustion, he hurried home through the drizzle, and climbed the four musty flights to the apartment. The hall and livingroom were dark, but he sensed immediately that there were people there, in back, in the bedroom. Switching on a light, he saw that the livingroom was filled with dirty glasses, cigarette butts and filthy clothes. Crusted dishes covered every inch of kitchen space, and he smelled the damp odor of stale laundry and bathtub gin.

He walked into the bedroom as a voice said, "The fog came on little cat's feet, sat silently. . . or something. . .

and then moved on."

A single candle guttered on the bureau, signifying that Hap was in his Bohemian mood and reading poetry.

He could hear a rustle on the bed, snickers. Outside the fog rolled near the windows, and the steamship whistles growled warnings, answering the scared feminine toots of the tugs and ferry boats.

"Let me up," a woman's voice said. "I think I'm going to puke."

"What the hell!" W. J. reached behind him and turned on the light. He saw Hap standing by the window, his arm around a sleezy-looking, dark-haired girl. He noticed the pale, unhealthy pallor of the boy, the long, unbrushed hair of the Village poet hanging down over the collar. On the bed--W. J.'s bed--Mike lay with another woman--a blonde. She was half dressed; her brassiere was loose, and she was drunk. "Hiya, good-lookin'," she said thickly.

Outside he heard a siren scream--an ambulance headed for St. Vincent's Hospital at the end of the block. It seemed to warn him. It said, "Get out! Beat it! You don't belong here!"

He looked at the sloppy woman leaning on Hap, and at the blonde who was struggling to get up, and he thought of Helen.

"Let me through. I want the bathroom," said the

blonde. As she staggered past him, he stood up straight to let her by. He smelt her stale, perfumed body--and suddenly he felt strong, superior, and worth six thousand a year.

. . . . . .

W. J. was still standing by the water tank, haunted by the memory of a time that seemed incredibly long ago, when soft sounds behind him made him turn.

His back to the partition, he saw the gray moths swarming down on him, until they were all around him, mopping, sweeping, talking to themselves. Ancient crones in dirty clothes, they moved like ghosts. They never looked up from the floor, never stopped, never noticed him--and suddenly he felt a kind of terror. It seemed to him that, somehow, he did not exist, and only the gray moths were real. . . that he was a shadow, a phantom, while they were a stream of life going by, a great gray stream speaking a tongue he could not understand, talking of a world without posters and auditions and clients and turning points. . . . talking, talking, mopping, doing the work of the world. . . sweeping up the trash. . . .

Stiffening his knees, he walked between two of them, mumbling "Excuxe me." But they didn't notice; didn't move aside. He hurried into his office, slammed the door on their paper-dry voices, and sank into his chair.

For a few moments he remained motionless, pushing down

the fear, letting the familiar, reassuring symbols of success around him quiet his jangled nerves. He was getting over-tired, he thought. He couldn't stand the pressure as he used to. He would have to start taking things easier as soon as this audition was over.

Across the street from him, the hotel window still glowed, and as he watched it absently, whipping his tired mind, a girl came and looked out. She was very young and wore a simple white nightgown, and as she leaned forward to look down on the street below, he saw that she was rather thin and not really pretty. She was sweet-looking, though, an honest, simple person, with hair in braids down her back.

What did she want from this city? he wondered. Did the street below, with its black pavement and glowing lights, look romantic and full of promise? Did it hold out a dream for her as it had for him so many years ago?

He must have shifted his body until his face showed by the light of his desk lamp; or perhaps she noticed his movement. She glanced up and caught his eye for a moment, and he saw a look of disgust cross her face. Then she pulled down the shade.

W. J. pushed Hap's latest book aside, and propping his elbows on his desk, he put his head in his hands. It was too late to do a top-flight job on the memo, but he would have to write something to make the deadline.

Where had he left off? Absently he reached over and pushed the play-back button on the little machine, and he heard the flat shadow of his own voice say matter-of-factly, ". . . . the tradition of Lincoln, Andy Jackson, Thomas Edison, and, yes, the great tradition of Horatio Alger. . . ."